

The District of Columbia Public Charter School Board

Ensuring the Accountability of Public Charter Schools in the District of Columbia

The District of Columbia Public Charter School Board operates under the District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995. Section 2211 of the Act requires that the chartering authority; "shall monitor the operations of each public charter school to which it has granted a charter; shall ensure that each such school complies with applicable laws and the provisions of the charter; and shall monitor the progress of each such school in meeting student academic achievement expectations specified in the charter."

The Board has set as its highest priority the establishment of well-conceived processes and procedures for ensuring the public accountability of the schools it charters. Toward this end, every school chartered by the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board will—

1. Be guided by thorough, well-designed educational and business plans;
2. Operate under a firm, but fair charter that clearly spells out the legal rights and obligations of the school;
3. Prepare and manage its own charter school accountability plan that sets goals for student achievement and school operations and measures how well those goals are being met; and
4. Be carefully monitored by the Board for compliance with the law and with its charter, for financial stability and fiscal responsibility, and for the academic achievement of its students.

Every school will be guided by thorough, well-designed plans.

Now in its second competitive cycle, the Board has developed a rigorous application and review process that places an emphasis on sound academic and business plans, strong leadership from committed boards of trustees, and solid financial planning. Every application approved by the Board for a charter has been thoroughly reviewed and its sponsors interviewed by a panel of several highly qualified reviewers, each with a different area of special competence. In addition, applicants whose plans are generally strong, but who do not yet meet the standards for charter approval are given extensive feedback and invited to revise and resubmit their applications for a second stage review. This challenging, yet developmental, process has resulted in a first cohort of schools with special promise for students in the District of Columbia.

Every school will operate under a firm, but fair charter.

The Board believes that a strong charter is an essential element for holding schools accountable for their performance. Accordingly, the Board has studied charter agreements from other states, sought sound legal advice, and invited comment from the schools and others on successive drafts of the charter agreement it will soon enter into

with ten new public charter schools. The Board believes that the resulting charter provides both the flexibility the schools need to make effective use of their resources and the leverage the Public Charter School Board needs to hold schools accountable for their outcomes.

Every school will prepare and manage its own charter school accountability plan.

To be accountable, public charter schools need to have procedures in place that enable them to 1) set challenging but achievable goals; 2) measure and track their progress toward their goals; 3) make program adjustments when needed; and 4) report to parents, the community, and the chartering authority on their performance and progress. These procedures are essential components of a charter school accountability plan that is specific to each school.

The District of Columbia Public Charter School Board and the schools it has approved for charters are now in the midst of a five-month process of working together to prepare a high quality accountability plan specific to each charter school. Accountability plans will be completed before school begins in September, and each will contain—

- A statement of challenging but attainable goals;
- A statement of student academic content and performance standards;
- A set of performance indicators that specify what will be measured;
- Annual and long-term performance targets (benchmarks);
- Measurement tools capable of supplying the information needed to judge performance;
- Strategies for using accountability information to support program improvement; and
- Procedures for reporting progress and for gauging customer satisfaction.

To assist the public charter schools that are participating in this accountability planning effort, the DC Public Charter School Board has made expert help available to the schools in the form of workshops and direct technical assistance that they can use to strengthen their accountability plans. Similar assistance will be available during the coming year as the schools solve the difficult problems that accompany the implementation of their accountability plans.

Information from the charter school accountability plans will be available to charter school trustees, administrators, and teachers for their use in improving the educational program and the operations of the school. Accountability information will be available to parents and the public to judge how well the school is meeting the needs of students. And accountability information will be used by the Public Charter School Board as it makes judgments about the school's stewardship of public funds and performance under its charter.

Every school will be carefully monitored by the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board.

At the same time charter schools are developing their accountability plans, the Board is developing its plan for monitoring the performance of the schools. The Board's monitoring plan will set out the reporting requirements of charter schools, including guidelines for a legislated annual report, semi-annual student enrollment census reports, periodic financial reports, an annual audit, and other reports required by the charter. The monitoring plan will also contain guidelines for annual, five-year, and special purpose reviews of compliance, performance, and progress. In addition, the monitoring plan will contain information about the procedures the Board will use to make decisions about the status of schools based on their performance. This will include guidelines for taking any corrective actions that may be needed to ensure accountability. It will also include guidelines for making and implementing Board decisions about charter renewal or revocation.