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**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Nelson Smith, D.C. Public Charter School Board  
**FROM:** Adam I. Lowe  
**DATE:** August 8, 2001  
**RE:** Summary Notes of Monitoring Focus Group Discussion – Trustees

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This memorandum summarizes the comments made by participants – charter school Trustees – in a focus group discussion arranged by the D.C. Public Charter School Board that was held on July 17<sup>th</sup>. These comments are the opinions of the participants, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the DC Appleseed Center.

The comments are not attributed to individual participants. To encourage candid discussion, the participants were informed that their comments would not be attributed. Any references that would identify an individual participant are not included in these notes. The comments are organized thematically, rather than chronologically as they were raised.

**PARTICIPANTS:** Tom Nida, Arts & Technology  
Anne Herr, Capital City  
Donald Hense, Edison-Friendship  
Albert "Butch" Hopkins, New School  
Rajiv Vinnakota, SEED

**ATTENDEES:** Bob Harrison, Keystone Consulting (Facilitator)  
Adam I. Lowe, DC Appleseed Center (Reporter)  
Richard Herzog, Harkins Cunningham/DC Appleseed (Observer)

## WHAT IS WORKING AND WHY?

- According to one participant, there is an relatively open dialogue between the Public Charter School Board and charter school leaders. This participant stated that issues that are raised are noted early – in marked contrast with other environments where problems are identified by a regulator only after the organization has embarked far down a particular course of action.
- One participant stated that some of the monitoring in the first year paralleled what the school was already doing as it gets operations up and running. This oversight was viewed as helpful to the school and not too intrusive as it coincided with the school’s own efforts. This participant believes that early feedback helps school leaders understand where they stand as they struggle through their first year – letting them know whether they are on the right track or not.
- The participants commented that new schools found it helpful when the Public Charter School Board asked more experienced schools to share their successes. One participant stated, however, that there is some tension in school participation due to the competition between schools for students.

## WHY MONITORING IS NECESSARY

- One participant stated that the monitoring process and the information produced in it builds the capacity for schools to make strategic decisions, ensuring that schools make these decisions, which otherwise might slip to the bottom of the pile and never get addressed.
- In discussions with lenders, one participant learned that strong oversight provides lenders with comfort as they consider making loans to charter schools. This participant heard from lenders that, in their view, weak oversight could lead to weak political support or failing schools, which could jeopardize all schools’ ability to repay loans. Local lenders stated to this participant that they are more comfortable lending to schools chartered by the Public Charter School Board than those chartered by the Board of Education.
- One participant stated that there has to be accountability for the use of public funds – the charter school movement needs accountability if it is to survive. Another participant would be concerned by very weak monitoring – in this participant’s view, one bad incident could bring down the entire charter school movement.

*Concerned foremost about how children fare.*

### **CHALLENGES WITH MONITORING**

- One participant noted that the broad brush of the Public Charter School Board's actions cover a wide range of schools, and recommended that the Public Charter School Board take this diversity into account in designing its monitoring programs.
- According to one participant, the tendency of the Public Charter School Board to prevent a single school failure leads to levels of oversight to guarantee this. This participant suggested that the Public Charter School Board be conscious of the sum total of monitoring requirements – which individually seem reasonable, but are burdensome in aggregate. This participant stated that the line needs to be drawn before the creep leads to onerous rules similar to those in the public school system.
- One participant recommended that common accountability measures be limited in number to prevent standardization of schools, which this participant stated was a problem with DCPS schools.
- A few participants stated that in performing oversight, the Public Charter School Board monitors sometimes do not know what they are looking for. For example, Public Charter School Board lawyers questioned the industry standard language used in a real estate transaction at one school. Similarly, the financial analyst was described as focusing, at times, on the details rather than the big picture.
- One participant stated that grievance procedures for handling parent and citizen complaints need to be clarified, and that all such complaints received by the Public Charter School Board should be referred to Trustee Boards. *Definitely ! !*

### **ROLE OF TRUSTEES IN ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT**

- The system should be moving towards school-based accountability, according to a few participants. These participants stated that as schools mature, their Trustee Boards need to take on some oversight from the Public Charter School Board.
- There was general consensus that, in performing its oversight functions, the Public Charter School Board needs to increase its dealings with Trustee Boards. One participant stated that, in particular, this would increase the development of Trustee Boards' ability to hold school leaders accountable. The participants stated that if Trustee Boards are to be held responsible for schools' actions or inactions, copies of correspondence need to be provided to the Trustee Boards. The participants also stated that the results of monitoring should be presented to Trustee Boards, in addition to school management.
- One participant remarked that the Public Charter School Board negotiated the school's accountability plan with the principal – the Trustee Board was thus dependent on the

*Should be through  
bd of Trustees*

principal to keep them involved. This participant recommended that, at the very least, the Public Charter School Board needs to tell principals when they need Trustee Board approval on matters that involve the Public Charter School Board.

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- Communication can be even more complicated when an Educational Management Organization (EMO) is involved, according to one participant. This participant believes that Trustee Boards should receive copies of all Public Charter School Board communications with their schools' administration.
  - One participant cautioned the others from confusing the policy-making functions of a Trustee Board with the functions of the administrative staff. This participant feels adequately informed by the Public Charter School Board.

**PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD NEEDS TO CONTINUE TO SUPPORT CHARTER SCHOOLS WITH EXTERNAL ENTITIES**

- A few participants stated that the Public Charter School Board needs to improve parent and public education to ensure that they realize that schools are being held accountable. These participants stated that parents need greater information on how to choose a school and what programs each charter school offers.
- One participant desired assistance from the Public Charter School Board in coordinating monitoring and site visits by other federal and local agencies, such as USDA and the D.C. Department of Health. In particular, this participant noted that the USDA's regulations were written for school districts, do not adjust to the scale of an individual charter school's operations, and included a disruptive surprise visit during Stanford-9 testing.
- A few participants raised a concern that no one examines the viability of EMOs nationally, and problems elsewhere could negatively impact charter schools in the District. One participant was curious if the Public Charter School Board discusses such issues with charter authorizers around the country.
- One participant stated that it would be very helpful if the Public Charter School Board had a mechanism to help identify and investigate funding inequities and locate resources for the charter schools. For instance, this participant recently learned from a DCPS principal that under the Greater Southeast contract for citywide health services, Children's Hospital will manage the school nursing program in DCPS – with Children's contributing 50% and the Department of Health the other 50%. There is no equivalent service level or funding for charter schools planned.

**HOW TO MAKE MONITORING MORE USEFUL TO SCHOOLS**

- To be helpful to schools, a few participants commented that monitoring needs to relate back to the unique goals of the individual school. One participant stated that some performance standards are universal, while others are school-specific objectives and goals – in particular, academic plan goals.
- There was general consensus that there should be a process for reporting benchmarks and best practices in areas such as teacher turnover and dropout rates, to help new charter schools learn lessons from more experienced schools. As described, this process would allow schools to compare their results not only with their own history, but also with schools in their peer group. The participants stated that much of the information needed for benchmarking is already collected during the oversight process.

**HOW TO IMPROVE THE MONITORING PROCESS**

- There was general consensus that a tiered system of oversight should be developed, with different levels of oversight depending on the status of the school. For instance, one participant stated that first-year schools need oversight to help them survive, while second-year schools tend to only need oversight that will help them succeed. Another participant suggest that a school might be placed back in the first tier if there was a change in leadership. A number of participants stated that there would need to be objective category standards so that the Public Charter School Board would not subjectively decide when a school moves from one category into the other. According to one participant, it is not clear what criteria are currently used to decide when a school graduates from monthly to quarterly financial reporting. One participant noted that in banking regulation, a scoring system is used with five different rating criteria. If a bank falls above a certain score, it receives a different level of oversight. According to this participant, the formality of the system keeps the standards objective.
- There was general consensus among the participants that the monitors need more training and need to do more advance planning and preparation before the site visits. One participant noted that during a past performance review, for instance, the review panel was not familiar with the self-study that the school had completed. The participants stated that the Public Charter School Board should educate the monitors about a school’s EMO relationships, academic goals, and operations before they arrive. Monitors should also be briefed about issues that the Public Charter School Board is concerned about – this would help target the visits to important issues and reduce the monitors’ learning curve during the visit. A site visit plan should always be agreed upon between the monitors and the school in advance of the visit.
- A few participants reported that some individuals on the evaluation teams in the past year have expressed skepticism or hostility about particular educational models used by

individual charter schools. These participants remarked that this approach is counterproductive during monitoring reviews, which are intended to review whether the educational model is being implemented successfully. As the educational model used by a school is negotiated during the chartering process, these participants stressed that they should not have to justify their choice of educational models to the monitors.

- One participant commented that technical reviews have been effective, but the recommendations stemming from the reviews should remain “advice.” This participant stated that it is not always clear which Public Charter School Board recommendations are suggestions and which should be considered mandatory. According to this participant, the Public Charter School Board should make the purposes of all monitoring actions clearer, to ensure that schools have a better understanding of the process.
- One participant stated that the number of site visits needs to be decreased and coordinated to occur in the same time period, as each individual site visit lasts at least a half day, often two full days. Combined with preparation time, this participant stated that the school administration devotes a full week of time to some reviews. Another participant recommended that on-site monitoring should occur no more frequently than once a year, though perhaps quarterly in the first year. Some of the targeted visits, such as the special education review, were identified by the participants as the most useful. One participant stated that care should be made when consolidating visits so that there is no loss in focus and that the monitors hired are still specialists, not generalists.
- One participant stated that the Public Charter School Board needs a proactive feedback mechanism for schools to bring concerns back to the Public Charter School Board about the monitors and the process. While this participant stated that the Public Charter School Board communicates a message of openness to feedback, this participant remarked that a formal mechanism is necessary to ensure that schools take advantage of this openness.
- According to a few participants, schools should have the option to replace the Public Charter School Board’s processes with equivalent processes. For instance, these participants suggested that a school might propose to the Public Charter School Board that it use the self-study framework used by its EMO or affiliated school design organization, rather than the Public Charter School Board’s self-study framework.
- A few participants stated that it may be possible to allow outside third-party monitors to perform some of the oversight that the Public Charter School Board currently does. For instance, these participants recommended that reviews performed by recognized accreditation organizations be allowed in place of Public Charter School Board reviews.