



THE ULTIMATE CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Why school districts shouldn't be overseeing charter schools

Suppose that a nonprofit organization known for running great educational programs wants to open a charter school in Pennsylvania. Suppose further that the nonprofit is willing to target its programs at students who have achieved poorly in a low-performing school district.

Sounds like a great opportunity for the community. But there's one problem: guess who gets to decide whether the school will be permitted to operate? In Pennsylvania, the local school board running the district gets to make that call.

Under Pennsylvania law, local school boards are responsible for reviewing charter applications, overseeing their operations, and renewing their charters. This provision was a legislative compromise between school districts' desire to maintain control over public education in their communities and reform advocates' desire to create a truly independent charter school sector. But the result is akin to letting McDonald's decide whether a Burger King can open across the street and, once it's opened, whether it should stay in business. Charter schools, after all, are meant to be autonomous public schools designed to compete with local districts for students, based on the premise that students and families should benefit when schools compete for their enrollment.

Not surprisingly, school boards have proven adversarial in their review of charter applications. A few enlightened school boards have recognized that good charter schools can be a plus for their community, but most routinely reject charter applications regardless of their quality, forcing the school organizers through a needless and costly state appeals process before they can eventually gain approval.

Charter school advocates aren't the only ones concerned about the process. Earlier this month, Randall Taylor, a former Pittsburgh school board member, criticized his district's standoffish approach toward charters.

"I believe decision-makers have come to the conclusion that the Pittsburgh Public Schools cannot compete with or against public charter schools, and that numerous students in some communities would enroll in a charter, if given that opportunity," Taylor wrote. He should know—he was on the board when the district rejected a half-dozen charter applications over the past four years.

Local districts often harbor resentment over any insinuation that they are not adequately serving their students. "The idea is good, but it's not needed here," is an all too common rebuttal to many charter school applications. And once a charter school begins operating, school districts seldom provide helpful, constructive oversight; they either ignore the charter school or poke around looking for reasons to deny its renewal a few years later.

It is time to change the law so that someone other than local school boards—perhaps a special state commission or state universities—can authorize charters.

Even the best-intentioned of local school boards are ill-suited to oversee charter schools. For the sake of all families who could benefit from the increased performance that competition between schools engenders, it's time to give the job of overseeing charter schools to someone with an interest in seeing all public schools thrive.

This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.



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