



**PROPEL
SCHOOLSSM**

Perspectives from Propel

INSPIRING ACHIEVEMENT

A series bringing the experience and expertise of Propel Schools to policymakers working to improve public education in Pennsylvania.

December 2009

Who Should Approve and Oversee Charter Schools?

Charter schools are credited with injecting new energy and enthusiasm into American public education over the last two decades. One key reason for this energy is that everyone involved with a charter school wants to be there. The founders and board members are deeply committed to the school's particular vision; teachers have made a conscious decision to pursue working in that type of school; and students have enrolled by their family's choice, not by district assignment.

Unfortunately, in Pennsylvania, there is one very reluctant participant—someone who has to be there but doesn't want to be there.

That's the school authorizer.

Pennsylvania law permits only a school district to serve as the authorizer for a public charter school. It's true that applicants can appeal the decision of a local school board not to award a charter, but even when the state Charter Appeals Board then gives the go ahead, it comes in the form of an order to the local school board to sign the charter. And ongoing oversight always remains with the local school district. We do not believe this arrangement supports the goal of developing and delivering quality public school choices in the Commonwealth; in Propel's own experience it has been significantly detrimental.

There are two main reasons why school districts often do not make good charter school authorizers. First, the application process creates a flood of bitterness, as school districts are forced to judge the quality of their prospective competition. Most districts resent and emphatically reject the insinuation that they are not adequately serving their students. (Almost every district where Propel has sought a charter has told us, "This is a good idea, but it's not needed here.") Charter hopefuls view the review process as an inquisition and the school board's denial of their application as self-serving and a conflict of interest. The denial triggers further conflict before a state appeal board, as districts try to shoot holes in the charter application in every conceivable way.

Every Propel school has had to go through to the Appeal Board for approval. In Steel Valley, which fought our charter all the way to Commonwealth Court, we have eventually repaired the hard feelings, resulting in a cordial, professional renewal process after five years. In Woodland Hills the ice has never melted: last month that school district, which has barely set foot in our Propel East school during its four years of successful operation, initiated action to deny renewal of the school's charter.

According to a recent report in the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, the Pittsburgh Public Schools will not consider selling a former elementary school if its potential use is as a charter school because it has a policy against aiding a “competing educational institution.” How can we expect school districts with established policy opposing charter schools to fairly evaluate charter applications?

The second problem with school district authorization of charter schools is poor oversight. Even when, through some combination of politics, good intentions, and respect for the law, local districts do grant charters, ongoing oversight becomes a second thought. District administrators are busy enough running the schools for which they carry direct responsibility and don’t have much time left for the independent charter schools they are theoretically charged with overseeing. The end result is either neglect, or as political winds shift, a form of oversight more akin to a witch hunt than constructive engagement.

Even districts with the best intentions struggle to fulfill this out-of-the-ordinary oversight role. When Steel Valley renewed Propel Homestead’s charter, the district, on its own initiative, inserted a provision stating that its staff would visit the school monthly. The spirit expressed was admirable, but the open time on staff calendars has not materialized and the visits have not occurred.

Better models for authorizing and overseeing Pennsylvania charter schools exist. Washington, D.C. has an independent Public Charter School Board that approves or denies applications and holds schools accountable for results. In New York, the State Board of Regents performs a similar role. In Michigan, public universities serve as charter authorizers.

We’re not proposing this change to make life easier for Pennsylvania charters. On the contrary, the D.C. Public Charter School Board and the New York State Board of Regents have set extremely rigorous standards for charter applications. Moreover, these entities closely monitor the schools they approve and do it in a manner intended to develop quality rather than poke holes.

All of Pennsylvania’s charter schools need credible oversight. School districts have neither the motivation nor the impartiality to provide it. Transferring the authorization and oversight role from school districts to an impartial third party committed to expanding the number of quality choices available to parents will improve both opportunity and accountability for charter schools.

This piece, in a modified form, appeared in the Harrisburg Patriot-News http://www.pennlive.com/editorials/index.ssf/2009/12/take_pennsylvania_charter_scho.html