

Douglas County School Choice Task Force

A Blueprint for School Choice in Douglas County

Choice Committee Vision

An education system that maximizes choice, celebrates freedom, improves quality through competition, promotes excellence, and recognizes that the interests of students and parents are paramount.

Subcommittee for

“Charter Schools: A Five-Year Plan”

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November 4, 2010

Charter Schools: A Five-Year Plan

Vision

“To strengthen the partnership between district leadership, neighborhood schools and our district charter schools.”

Our subcommittee believes in the right of parents to choose what is best for their child’s education—charter schools being one option. Through the direction of the new board and the hire of Dr. Celania-Fagen as the new superintendent, the district reflects the community’s support for school choice. Our subcommittee would like to see the district begin to better communicate current and future school choice options in Douglas County schools. A broader communication plan would include outreach through community meetings, DCSD’s *Newsline*, DCSD’s website, and local publications.

Our subcommittee has discussed several challenges facing Douglas County Charter Schools and decided to focus on three areas for the 5-year plan:

- Authorizing Partnership
- Financial Equity
- Growth

Authorizing Partnership

An improvement in the Authorizing Process is already being formalized that will use the model charter school application and contract being developed by the Colorado Department of Education. The subcommittee recommends that these documents and processes be implemented next year, as is already currently being planned within the charter school department. All current practices are being documented in a procedure manual with sections that include:

- Current Charter School Information
- Charter School Law
- Board of Education Charter School Policy
- Charter School Application Process
- Contract Renewal Procedure
- Charter School Accreditation Procedure
- Charter School Revocation and Closure Procedure
- Other procedures (i.e. Purchase Service Procedure)

The charter school department and this subcommittee realize that improvements have been made to the quality of the authorizing process; nonetheless, there may still be room for improvements. While all of the subcommittee members agree with the previous sentence, the members have two differing recommendations on a best next-step for the continuous improvement of the authorization process.

- Some members of the subcommittee recommend that an outside review of the current charter authorization process be provided by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). This review can provide recommendations for improvement of the current authorization process, as well as, give an affirmation of the best practices that are in place. Information is attached regarding a NACSA grant opportunity. DCSD is currently a member of NACSA*.
- Some members of the subcommittee recommend that, given the opportunity, the charter department will seek out possible resources at the local, state, and national levels to secure a review of the authorization process once the documentation and process is in place as identified above. The purpose of the review would be to determine the most current and the best practices for authorizing charter schools and make changes as appropriate to improve the authorization process in DCSD.

Our recommendation for a model partnership would be to better communicate the following:

- Information about each charter school currently authorized by DCSD.
- Descriptions that articulate the similarities and differences between the charter schools.
- A clear explanation of the distinction between charter schools and neighborhood schools.
- By posting the charter school application process, related documents, and available resources for new school developers on the DCSD website.

Financial Equity

Currently, the district is moving in a positive direction with regard to financial equity for charter schools:

- Charter schools receive 100% PPR from the district.
- A resolution adopted by the Board of Education in 2010 will make per pupil distribution of mill levy override revenues equitable across the district by the 2012-2013 school year, with a phase-in beginning in this current budget year.

Our recommendation for an equitable charter school/district financial partnership is to review all federal, state, and local revenues currently disbursed to DCSD for general fund expenditures, and identify what revenue streams exist that should be distributed across the district on a per pupil basis (for example, at-risk funds, gifted and talented funds, specific ownership tax).

The current state of DCSD bond initiatives is reflected in three past “events”:

- The district provided its charter schools with \$2.6 million for capital improvement, distributed over three years (2007-10), from the successful 2006 bond election.
- In 2008 the district and the charter school leadership could not come to an agreement on how to share bond funds proposed to the voters.
- DCSD issued a Certificate of Participation for Sky View Academy in late 2009 to fund its facility purchase and subsequent renovation.

Our recommendation for future bond issues would be to specifically include charter schools in an equitable manner. This would include:

- A fair distribution/assignment of future bond issue revenues raised (and subsequent interest earned) for purposes of building new, or remodeling current, school facilities and/or for other capital expenditures.

- Investigating the feasibility of bond refinancing under the District’s bond rating for bonds currently held by charter schools in order to reduce the annual cost of debt service, and/or the length of the bond obligation.
- Investigating the legality and financial feasibility of DCSD acquiring ownership of school facilities currently owned/bonded by charter schools.

Charter School Growth

The current process of charter school growth at this time is that an applicant group can fill out an application in order to start a charter school. The charter school proposal is approved or denied by our Board of Education. While there was some discussion around a Request for Proposal (RFP) process, the subcommittee really did not see an RFP plan for the next 5 years.

Our recommendation for the next five years is that DCSD and the BOE continue to support any credible parent effort to open a new charter school. However, our subcommittee urges the Board of Education to discuss its view on the following questions:

- Education Management Organizations (EMO’s) vs. our “home grown” schools- Will the BOE and the Douglas County community support a for-profit entity being responsible for providing public education in DCSD?
- Is it valid to consider, or argue, that there may be a time and place when DCSD could have too many charter schools and/or options? Do both the charter and district-at-large communities (as separate communities) believe that given certain situations/ circumstances there will be such a time and place in the future? Can these situations/ circumstances be identified and defined?
- Should an acceptable minimum and maximum capacity for DCSD neighborhood schools be determined? Will this play into approving a new charter school because its location/ enrollment would impact the minimum/maximum capacity standard for a nearby neighborhood school? Could this impact result in the “closure” of a neighborhood school that loses enrollment and has fewer students than the minimum standard? Is that OK? Could this “closure” mean reopening the closed facility as some other type of school or use?

An Addendum

This subcommittee’s time and conversations were primarily focused on the three areas presented in this report. Nonetheless, there was one topic – Special Education in Charter Schools - given some voice and reiterated in a recent article in the *Denver Post* (10/26/2010) which began with this lead sentence:

“A familiar — and well-founded — criticism of charter schools is that most don't serve all students, specifically children with significant special needs.”

Yes, this is a familiar criticism, but is it a fair criticism for Douglas County Charter Schools? Is it “well-founded” on facts or based on emotions, misinformation, or lack of information?

It is suggested that this topic/criticism as it relates to Douglas County School District and its Charter Schools be reviewed and investigated within a reasonable timeframe sometime in the future.

* Following are two informational links about NACSA:

http://www.qualitycharters.org/index.php?view=article&catid=2%3Aauthorizer-quality&id=8%3Aprinciples-and-standards&tmpl=component&print=1&layout=default&page=&option=com_content&Itemid=3

http://www.qualitycharters.org/index.php?view=article&catid=3%3Athe-fund&id=10%3Aabout-the-fund&tmpl=component&print=1&layout=default&page=&option=com_content&Itemid=4