

Charter schools: Now what?

by **Randy Quinn, executive director of CASB**
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Make no mistake about it: the Colorado Association of School Boards opposed the bill creating charter schools.

When faced with the issue, we quickly realized that charter schools were likely going to be a reality with or without school boards, considering that such political polar opposites as Gov. Roy Romer and Sen. Bill Owens were on the same side. Their advocacy for charter schools was augmented by strong support from members of the State Board and officials of CDE.

CASB worked vigorously before and during the legislative session to shape charter schools into a bill that would be more acceptable to local school board members. When that did not happen, we worked just as vigorously to kill the bill.

All the pro/con arguments now are meaningless: we have a law authorizing parents, teachers and others to create charter schools. Is it the beginning of the end of public education as we have known it, or is it an opportunity in disguise?

Let me take the positive side of the argument, at least for the purpose of current debate: yes, it can indeed be viewed as an opportunity to do something new and creatively different. Here's how.

Since public schools were born in 1647 in Massachusetts, school boards have been the *providers* of public education. They have performed the provider role by hiring teachers, administrators and other staff members. They have decided what is to be taught, and at times how it is to be taught, and they have decided what is good or bad for schools within the total districts they were elected to serve.

Under charter schools, that role will change. Schools granted charter status will, at least in large measure, become self-governing. Many of the decisions traditionally made by school boards at the district level will be made at the charter school site by another governance entity.

This is a dramatic, very fundamental difference, one that forces the school board to reexamine its role. Rather than serving as provider, the board has an opportunity to become the purchaser of education services on behalf of the citizens of the community served by the board.

This is a role that opens up all kinds of possibilities for school boards. For example:

- **Why should a school board wait for a charter application to be presented?** Why not identify, through a solid, community-based strategic planning process, the various kinds of schools and education programs the community wants, then "charter" (or hire) some provider to deliver those programs? The board's role as interpreter of community wants and needs is retained, but it finds the best source to provide the desired service and then monitors and evaluates whether the provider does that job well.

- **Why should every education program be delivered in a structure called a "school,' paid for by public dollars?** Is it unreasonable to think that large businesses or industries, or even other units of government, might be willing and anxious to cooperate with the school board by providing physical facilities to house tax-supported education programs as a convenience to their employees or centers of population?
- **Can charter schools be viewed as a new way to solve previously unresolvable conflicts within school districts?** All across the state and nation, school boards are caught in the middle of competing philosophies about what public schools should do or not do. Charter schools may be a vehicle to establish schools of different types to help deal with these dashes of values.

Viewed one way, the underlying principle behind charter schools is not new. School boards now contract with third-party providers to do some things within districts, including transportation, food, and cleaning and maintenance services.

Thus the basic shift of role from provider to purchaser already has occurred in several non-academic parts of public school operations. Granted, extending that concept to academic areas all the way to decentralized school governance is a leap, but one that is not unimaginable, if the board is willing to assume a purchaser role.

A pretty face on an ugly challenge? Maybe. But the fact is we are faced with a new way of doing business; we either go kicking and screaming into the future, or we lead the charge and make the best lemonade ever to come from a sour fruit.

In my view, Colorado school boards would be well advised to tap the depths of their creative insight to examine how this new concept best can serve their communities' children. If the role of the board must change somewhat, let that too be factored into the assessment of how to use the law to best advantage. Moving away from the role of exclusive provider of education services may be a blessing in disguise. .

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