



MEMO

To: Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement
United States Department of Education

From: Curtis Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Robert Wedl, for Education Evolving

Date: January 2, 2015

Re: Comments on proposed priorities etc., for program of grants to state education agencies
(Context: in November, 2014 the U.S. Department of Education proposed a set of priorities, requirements, and criteria for the federal charter grants to state education agencies. Here is the response of three senior E|E associates to that proposal.)

000

1. The critical question with respect to these proposals for the program of grants is the one raised early in the Executive Summary. “How,” the document asks, “does ‘charter schools’ fit into the state’s broader education reform strategy?”

- Public education, the system, exists in state law. The chartering program exists in state law. The program of federal support for chartering should support state law and policy.
- That has been the approach. Early, in the initial program of grants for the start-up of new schools under these laws, the policy of the Department and of the Congress was to defer to state definitions about what entities might start and run a school and what entities might (as is now said) authorize schools.

2. That basic concept of the federal grant program – to help the states implement the charter element of their effort to improve public education – suggests what would now be appropriate for the Department’s program of support.

- It should encourage and facilitate innovation. This was one of the principal objectives as chartering was introduced into the laws of the states in the 1990s.
- This is evident in the laws, which leave it open for those forming the school to adopt the approach to learning, curricular theme and organizational model they choose.

- It remains legitimate and necessary for the states to continue to encourage innovation in the chartered sector.
 - Innovation can be fully consistent with accountability. Those creating schools may try new approaches and new models; held responsible and accountable for their results in the way the press in our country is free to publish without prior restraint but can be held to account for what has published.
- It should respect a state's desire to improve schools and learning across the whole field of problems, using the broadest possible definition of achievement.

While the improvement of learning for low-income students in elementary school in the inner cities is a special priority, most states will be concerned and will want help also with schools and students in their rural areas, and in secondary schools where student performance tends to fall off in the upper grades.

States might well be concerned also to achieve high performance for students doing well in fields of particular importance to that state's and to the nation's economy. Proficiency, while basic, is not the only appropriate goal for education policy.

- It should define 'accountability' in relation to a school's success in meeting the objectives it agreed with its authorizer it would achieve.

This will oblige the school to have its students performing well in the academic areas covered by the state's standards and assessments. But it will mean the concept of success and therefore of accountability will be broad enough to embrace other concepts of performance as well.

This will also acknowledge the principle that quality is multi-dimensional, and that judgments about 'success' are made on balance.

- It should welcome states' efforts to innovate with authorizing.

Minnesota is perhaps a good example. It was the first state to adopt a chartering law. From the beginning it experimented with a variety of 'sponsors'/authorizers: districts, the state board, the commissioner of education, post-secondary institutions both public and private, and large non-profits.

- It has a multi-authorizer system. Over time it has enacted a variety of reforms to strengthen authorizing.
- Out of a concern that authorizers give priority attention to the critical work of reviewing applications and overseeing schools, this state moved in its 2009 legislative



session to introduce the concept of the ‘single-purpose authorizer’; a newly-created nonprofit, approved by the commissioner, whose sole job is to solicit proposals, to review and act on proposals, and to oversee the operation of the schools it approves to operate.

- There has now appeared an alternative to the ‘staff’ model; a new model of authorizer that creates a ‘cadre’ of knowledgeable and experienced educators – administrators and/or teachers – that provide the authorizer the capacity to deal with any type of problem appearing in its operating schools; and to do so at reasonable cost.

3. It might be useful, and appropriate, for the Department to solicit ideas from the states with chartering programs as to the types of assistance they would find most helpful in their effort to improve performance – and especially to improve innovation – in their chartering programs.

oo

We have preferred to make our comments and suggestions general with respect to the purpose of the state chartering programs, which the Department’s grant program seeks to assist.

We hope this – perhaps somewhat untypical – comment will be helpful; will receive serious consideration, coming as it does from a group some of whose members have been involved with chartering dating back to its beginnings in Minnesota in 1991.

Respectfully submitted:

Curtis Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Robert Wedl
For Education Evolving