

THE ESSENTIALS OF THE ‘CHARTER-SCHOOL’ STRATEGY

The purpose of a charter law is to encourage and enable the creation of new and innovative public schools under arrangements that will stimulate districts to change and improve their schools. **For students** the objective is higher achievement and graduation rates. **For educators** it is the freedom to create different and better programs. **For the system** – and for the state – it is the accountability that comes from a contract relationship and the stimulus that comes from knowing a district can no longer take its students for granted.

- 1. The school may be organized, and owned and run, by any of several parties. No one, however, has a right to set up a charter school.**

The organizers may be teachers, parents, perhaps a museum or university, or some other entity. They may start a new school or may convert an existing school to autonomous-public status. They must receive an affirmative approval by a responsible public body for the particular school they propose to operate.

- 2. The organizers may approach more than one public body for their charter.**

Traditionally only the local board could offer public education in the community. With a charter law the state opens this opportunity to others: to the state board of education, or a higher-education board, or a city council or county board, or to some new entity created just for this purpose. The local board is not excluded as a possible sponsor, but there is a ‘somebody else’. The designated public body does not own and run the charter school: It sponsors the school.

- 3. The school will become a legal entity.**

A school today does not exist legally. A charter school can be a legal entity. The law may provide for the school to choose any form of organization available under general state law; or may specify that the school will be (say) a non-profit. As an entity the school will have its own board. Site-management becomes real. The teachers will belong to the school. If employees they will have full rights to organize and bargain collectively but the bargaining unit will be separate from the district.

- 4. The school is public. This remains public education.**

The school is chartered by public law to carry out a public purpose under contract to public authority. There can be no religious character to the instruction, no charging tuition, no selective admissions, and no discrimination. Health and safety laws must be followed. A charter school is a public school. These sharply distinguish the charter idea from the voucher idea.

5. The school accepts an accountability for results.

The school is chartered for a limited term. The objectives for (and the method of measuring) student performance are agreed-on up front. Renewal depends on performance, and the contract may be terminated for cause. Accountability shifts from process to performance.

6. The school gets real freedom to change.

Because it accepts an accountability for results the charter school is normally exempted from the state regulations and statute law that governs districts (except, of course, for what essentially defines public education). The elaborate 'rules' that control traditional schools are unneeded: a failing charter school will be closed.

7. It is a school of choice.

The school is accountable in a second way. Students, and teachers, are there if they want to be there. No one is assigned. Educators and families actively choose the school. This provides the stability necessary both in the student body and in the faculty for the school to create and maintain a distinctive educational program.

8. The full amount that belongs to the student moves with the student, and the state pays the school directly.

This amount is roughly the average statewide per-pupil amount, or the amount in the district from which the student comes. 'Categorical' aids, as for students from low-income families, will also move. The school will have the same opportunities as a district to apply for government and private grants. The state pays the school; transferring the student's money from the district s/he previously attended to the charter school. It is the student's money.

9. Teachers will be protected, and will have new opportunities.

Teachers make take leave from a district to teach in a charter school. While in the school they retain rights provided by the leave-statute as to seniority, benefits, and right-to-return. They may remain in, or may join, the retirement system. Teachers may choose to be employees. Alternatively they may form a professional group which they collectively own, through which they design and operate the learning program under an agreement with the school.