

“Windows on the Next Generation of Charter Schools and Chartering”

Remarks by Jon Schroeder*
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Thanks very much for the opportunity to be here today and for the opportunity to be a part of what has grown to be one of the half-dozen largest charter school conferences in the country. A special welcome and thank you to all the teachers who have joined the conference for today's sessions.

And, to all of you, Happy National Charter Schools Week!! This is the fifth annual National Charter Schools Week. And, all this week, all across the country, charter school folks are rightfully tooting their own horns -- and being recognized by others... from the city hall and court house, to the state capital, to the nation's capital and the White House.

National Charter Schools Week is a good time to look back and to collectively pat yourselves on the back for everything that's been accomplished in your schools and in this organization in the few short years since Pennsylvania joined the ranks of the charter school movement nationally.

Looking ahead – through cloudy windows – at a work still in progress

The size and quality and enthusiasm around this conference is evidence of just how far the Pennsylvania charter school movement has come over the last six or seven years.

But, I want to spend my allotted time here today challenging you to look *ahead* to what might be thought of as a “second generation of charter schools and chartering” in this state and in the rest of the country.

A lot of the vision I want to share with you today reflects my own experience in Minnesota. But, Minnesota's experience with charter schools and chartering is not unique.

We've just been at it longer than a lot of other places and had the opportunity to learn and benefit from our own experience and the experience of lots of others, as well.

To get a sense of this vision, I want you to imagine a big construction project – say in downtown Philadelphia or Pittsburgh or any other large city. This construction project takes up a whole block in the center of town. And, the block is surrounded by a high wooden fence, designed to keep curious sidewalk superintendents out of the way.

It's possible to follow the progress of this construction project, however. As you walk around the block, there are a series of windows cut into the wooden wall. And, each one is covered by not-quite-clear plastic.

The view from each of these windows is different, as you walk around the block. It's not always clear what's going on because of the opaque plastic covering the window. And, because this is a work in progress, what you see changes from day-to-day.

This is the tour I'd like to take you on this noon...an after lunch walk around the block of the construction project you're working on every day...looking through ten different, somewhat foggy windows that will each give us a glimpse of our next generation of charter schools and the environment in which they will live and, we hope, thrive.

A much more strategic role for chartering schools new

This is a very different environment for very different schools, with very different roles for teachers... serving an increasingly diverse set of students and their families.

This vision rejects the notion that we remain on the course that many states are now on – viewing chartering as a useful, but somewhat *peripheral element* of efforts to change and improve *existing public schools*.

This vision also rejects the notion that we continue to *respond* to and support what appears to be a moderate stream of good ideas put forward by educators and others proposing new ways of teaching and learning.

Instead, this vision is based on the premise that we must become much more *strategic and much more pro-active* in identifying gaps in the educational environments our all of states now have. And, it's based on the premise that we must use chartering to consciously *create many more and significantly different schools new*.



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This series of windows looks in on both charter schools and the public policy environment that determines if they are allowed to emerge and succeed.

So, let's start on our little after-lunch walk around the block... looking through ten admittedly foggy windows at what's admittedly a work still-in-progress.

Window #1 – A clear and convincing rationale for chartering

Looking through Window #1, we see a new and a clear and convincing rationale for chartering... an understanding by policy makers that charter schools are a mechanism to address serious gaps in the capacity of our current educational system... gaps in our capacity to serve the needs of an increasingly diverse student population – by creating many new and substantially different public schools of choice.

This strategy for change needs to be at least on par with parallel strategies to change and improve the schools we now have.

This is not to say that parallel effort – now largely focused on implementation of the federal “No Child Left Behind” legislation – should not go forward.

It is to say that it's neither wise nor responsible to place all of our hopes and expectations for necessary change and improvement on strategies that depend so heavily on changing *existing* schools.

This “new schools strategy” must also be articulated in ways that ensure that state leadership and policy support for charters and chartering can – over time – transcend changes in each state's political and policy leadership. It's a strategy – in other words – that must be embraced by both Democrats and Republicans if it is to succeed over time.

That should be possible, politically, since chartering should enjoy the philosophical support of those on the conservative side of the political spectrum, while also providing new and better options for many students and families that have traditionally supported liberal policymakers and elected officials.

Maintaining this broad bi-partisan coalition of support is critical in overcoming what are clearly strong and entrenched defenders of the status quo.

Window #2 – A broadening definition of what we mean by ‘public education’

As we continue around the block and look through Window #2, we see continued shifting and expansion in the boundaries that have historically defined “public education,” while preserving its most essential core elements.

Let me use what's been going on in Minnesota over the last 15 or 20 years to help make this part of this vision more clear.

Minnesotans, like Pennsylvanians, have a deep and historic commitment to public education. But, over time, the definition of “public education” in Minnesota has consciously and systematically been expanded. It now includes:

* **Post Secondary Enrollment Options**... A program under which Juniors and Seniors in public and private high

schools attend public and private universities at state expense.

* **Contract alternative schools and area learning centers**... a program under which school districts contract with private, non-profit organizations to provide public education to students not succeeding in district public schools.

* **Charter schools**... Private, non-profit organizations that are granted authority to open and then receive public funding on a reasonably equal basis with districts to deliver public education to their students.

* And, finally, **dozens of both public and private sector authorizers** -- including private universities, non-profit organizations and foundations – all having the authority to grant charters and provide ongoing oversight of charter public schools.

In the future, it's likely that this expansion of how Minnesotans define public education will continue. Done right and with broad bi-partisan support, this approach to improving public education could represent a major breakthrough in narrowing the differences among those who have historically supported more traditional definitions of both public and private school choice.

Whether that happens will depend on a clear understanding that public education is a set of *principles* – not a set of *institutions*. It will also require an emphasis on creating *high quality* learning environments that *produce better results*.

Window #3 – Using chartering more strategically and more pro-actively

Moving further down the wooden fence and looking through Window #3, we see a vision under which we will use charter schools and chartering much more strategically and proactively to address huge gaps in achievement levels among racial, income and other demographic groups of students and their families.

As a nation, we need to become much more comfortable with the reality that our current education system simultaneously both works quite well for large numbers of students and is nowhere near adequate for many others.

It's simply not acceptable that we tolerate what in many places is a growing gap between achievement levels and graduation rates of white students and students of color.

This realization – about the fact that we really have two systems of public education in this country – requires discipline on the part of those seeking change – in how we characterize public education.

It's neither accurate nor wise to make negative generalizations about the performance of public education as a whole.

But, this realization also requires a willingness on the part of historic defenders of traditional public education – to admit to clear deficiencies and a willingness to have a much more open mind about supporting new and different opportunities for change.

Overall, this vision requires that we be much more strategic and proactive in identifying gaps or deficiencies we

now have and in filling those gaps by creating many more new and fundamentally different schools.

One proposal now pending in the Minnesota Legislature is intended to encourage this more strategic and proactive approach to chartering new schools. This legislation would authorize creation of up to five new, single purpose non-profit sponsoring organizations. This would be in addition to the current provision in Minnesota's charter law that allows non-profit organizations with at least \$2.0 million in assets to grant and oversee charter schools.

Unlike current non-profit sponsors, however, these new sponsoring organizations would have no other mission than to grant charters and oversee charter schools. They would also specialize on specific types of schools or specific, unmet student needs.

For example, one of the new non-profit sponsors might focus on schools with a particular learning or governance model. Another might focus only on rural schools or on schools designed to address Minnesota's huge racial and demographic learning gaps. A third might focus on distance learning schools or on schools linking high school with college.

Finally, these new single purpose sponsors would be proactive...requesting proposals and seeking out the best models available to address the priority needs they identify – both nationally and from within the state.

Window #4 – A more diverse cadre of better-supported charter sponsors

Moving further down the block, Window #4 provides a glimpse of a much more diverse cadre of sponsoring organizations...and a much greater emphasis on strengthening their capacity to authorize and oversee high quality charter schools.

There are exceptions, of course. But, it's clear from our experience -- in your state and in mine – that this opportunity for change and improvement in public education can't depend only on chartering authority granted to public school boards and districts.

Beyond the kind of single purpose sponsors now being proposed in Minnesota, states like Pennsylvania need to be empowering others to grant and oversee charter schools. Higher education institutions, mayors, and state boards of education are now all making that clear in a growing number of charter school states.

But, just granting chartering authority isn't enough either. Charter school sponsors need the same kind of networking, technical assistance and attention to quality as do charter schools.

One example of this kind of extra attention to sponsors is the Charter School Sponsor Collaborative, started by the organization I work for in Minnesota. Another is the Charter School Sponsorship Institute, recently launched in Ohio. The National Association of Charter School Authorizers is also an excellent resource for sponsors in every state in the country.

Let me make it clear that I'm not talking about increased governmental regulation of sponsors. A much better approach – something we're also now working on in Minnesota – is voluntary adoption of a set of principles or best practices developed by the most experienced and best-performing sponsors themselves.

In return for adopting such set of principles or best practices, individual sponsors might be given greater deference the state's oversight of charters those sponsors authorize. Or such sponsors might be able to access additional financial resources to support their sponsoring activities.

In most states, chartering is now being subsidized by most sponsors. That's a barrier to both expanding the number of schools many sponsors charter and to increasing their capacity to carry out their multiple roles.

So one part of this vision of the next generation of chartering is some combination of federal, state, school and private revenue sources... revenues that are made available to all sponsors who voluntarily agree to some common set of principles or best practices, designed by sponsors themselves to improve the quality of their work.

Window #5 – Greater efforts to document the success of individual charter schools

Moving on, through a Fifth Window, we see significantly expanded efforts to document the successes of individual charter schools in meeting student achievement goals...not just of the federal "No Child Left Behind" legislation, but also tied to the unique mission and student populations of each charter school.

It's no secret that many charter – and non-charter – educators have serious reservations about what they view as a "one-size fits all" approach to academic accountability that's presumed in the federal "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) legislation.

They're particularly concerned about the uniform and relatively limited measures used to determine "Adequate Yearly Progress" on a decade-long path toward proficiency on a common set of standards by all public school students in the state.

While agreeing with the overall goal of holding schools accountable for results, they feel this approach ignores the realities of a continuous entry of new schools, highly mobile student populations and a variety of learning models needed to address widely varying student needs.

These concerns are not limited to charter educators and it's likely that adjustments to these kinds of realities will be made in NCLB over time.

As changes are considered and made, state and federal policy makers must solicit and listen to the insights of charter school operators and sponsors.

At the same time, charter school operators and sponsors must be much more proactive in developing academic goals and appropriate measures of how well they're doing to achieve them.

Each state's standards for core subject areas will probably be included in this process. But, at the same time, charters should be considered laboratories both for developing

new goals for the knowledge and skills students should be acquiring and for determining how progress toward achieving those goals can best be measured.

This process should include strong input from students and their parents and from the ultimate “customers” for K-12 education -- including post-secondary educators, employers and the military -- who should all be both defining and recommending measures for what it is that *they* need graduates of K-12 education to know and be able to do.

Strategies to make small schools both viable and financially feasible

As we continue walking around the block of our construction project in progress, the rest of our windows give us a picture of a next generation of charter schools and a policy environment that will make it possible to test new and creative ways of teaching and learning...especially at the secondary level and on a much smaller scale.

Charter school advocates must continue to challenge the notion that both urban and rural learning sites must be larger than research demonstrates they should be to serve well the academic and other related interests of students.

At the same time, making small schools – especially small high schools – realistically viable will require much more than evidence that they work well for students.

They must be financially feasible, as well. And, that means fundamental changes in some of the basic elements of public education as we’ve known it, including how we organize and finance public school facilities, extra-curricular activities and pupil transportation, as well as how we serve students with disabilities and how we define teacher quality.

Let’s take up these elements of the policy environment needed to ensure the viability of fundamentally different and smaller schools one at a time as we look through the remaining windows on our walk around the block this noon.

Window #6 – New ways of financing public school facilities

Window #6 allows us to glimpse creative, flexible and affordable ways of financing public school facilities.

This includes the kind of state per pupil aid for facilities – on top of operating revenues – that we now have in Minnesota, Florida and a few other states.

Minnesota charter schools now get a maximum of up to \$1,500 per student per year to pay rent on buildings. In about 15 cases, these payments are, in effect, used to make payments on long-term debt for those buildings.

This program has made a huge difference in not only the quality of charter school facilities in Minnesota, but in the resources these schools have been able to use in the classroom -- where they belong.

Under the No Child Left Behind law, all states now have an incentive to pass initiatives like this of their own through a matching incentive grant program. Almost \$20.0 million is available under this program this year. And, policy makers in this and other states have an obligation to take advantage

of this opportunity and adopt a per pupil facilities aid program of their own.

In addition, charter schools should be able to access tax-exempt financing for facilities at rates comparable to the General Obligation bond rates available to school districts, perhaps through state-supported loan guarantee and loan pooling arrangements.

And charter schools should be assured priority treatment in accessing excess building capacity in the district sector.

Longer-term, charters should be viewed as an R&D opportunity for testing more flexible and affordable ways of financing facilities for all public schools. Ideally, such facilities financing should be provided by the state and should be flexible enough to follow students to the growing number of public school choices being made available to them.

It should also support a variety of kinds of sites for teaching and learning, including multi-use facilities and schools that benefit from co-locations and partnerships with other organizations. And it should not discourage creation of less capital-intensive schools that place a much greater emphasis on technology and on learning that takes place away from traditional school sites.

Window #7 – New ways of arranging and financing pupil transportation

Moving on, Window # 7 gives us a quick look at more creative and flexible ways of arranging and financing pupil transportation.

One of the realities of offering more choice -- and more choices...is that it inevitably costs more to transport students to numerous, often smaller school sites.

So, one of the realities facing states with a strong commitment to school choice is that we must be willing to make a greater state financial commitment to getting students to and from school and related activities.

That’s true both for charters and for districts when they offer a significant number of choices among their own schools.

Beyond money, education policy leaders in both the charter and district sectors should work together to develop new approaches to financing and organizing pupil transportation. This might include use of public transportation systems where available and age-appropriate for students.

It could also mean subsidizing parents and other adults to transport students, as well as collaboration with employers, district and private schools, higher education institutions and other common destinations.

Safety of students must be paramount in exploring these or other options.

But, the affordability and feasibility of numerous, smaller school choices inevitably depends on finding new and more cost-effective ways of transporting students to and from those schools they choose to attend.

Window #8 – Community role in paying for and organizing extra-curriculars

Along the same vein, Window #8 – captures a quick glimpse of how our next generation of charter schools must create new partnerships with districts and with the community in organizing and financing extra-curricular activities.

Small high schools will inevitably struggle to provide the range of extra-curricular activities that their students will demand.

In the short-term it seems reasonable that charter school students be allowed to participate on sports teams and in other extra-curricular activities sponsored by their “home district” high school.

To be fair, that opportunity might carry with it a requirement that charter schools and their students pay whatever fees and per-student subsidies are being paid by district students and by the resident district.

Longer-term, however, greater availability of small high schools will require fundamental changes in how extra-curricular activities are organized and funded.

Options include organizing these activities on a geographic or community basis. Such arrangements would also include much stronger partnerships with Community Education, city and county park and recreation departments and with non-school sports, arts and other youth serving organizations and activities.

Finally, these extra-curricular activities need not have the winning-is-everything mentality we see too often in many district school sports and other competitive activities. By building their own program from scratch, in partnership with other community institutions, charters have the opportunity to more fully-integrate extra-curricular activities with their academic programs and with other goals of the school.

Window #9 – New models for funding and delivering special education

Almost completing our walk around the block of this construction work in progress, Window #9 – offers us a look at creative new models for financing and supporting educational services for students with disabilities.

As public schools, charters have an obligation to accept all students who choose to enroll. And, in many states, they have the same responsibility as districts under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and other federal and state legislation pertaining to special education and students with disabilities.

Again, because of their small scale, this creates a financial risk for individual schools that might be bankrupted by unfunded costs of serving even just a few students that require higher cost services.

A few states have programs in place to address the potential financial risk. In Minnesota, charters have been able to take advantage of a pre-existing law that allows districts (including charters) to bill back to the district of residence costs of providing special education services that exceed revenues received by the school for that student.

This law has been essential to charters as a form of “catastrophic insurance protection” against individual high cost cases that could otherwise bankrupt them. Ultimately, however, this backup financial protection must be provided by the state, rather than districts.

That might be more likely under legislation encouraging states to create state-level risk pools for this purpose that is now pending in Congress. Once that legislation is adopted, charters and districts in all states should work together to develop state-level mechanisms to make sure that serving special needs students is feasible for all public schools regardless of their size or relationship with districts.

And longer-term, charter schools should be viewed as a laboratory for designing and testing new and more effective ways of serving special education students within a context of both historic legal obligations and protections and today’s context of expanded parent options and choice.

Window #10 – New opportunities for teachers as professionals

Finally, Window #10 offers a glimpse at captures a quick glimpse of how our next generation of charter schools must create new partnerships with districts and with the community in organizing and financing extra-curricular activities.

This window also includes a look at some very different models for teachers to organize themselves and be treated as true professionals.

As you know, the federal “No Child Left Behind” legislation requires that charter and all other public school teachers be “highly qualified.” By “highly qualified,” NCLB places a very high premium on being able to demonstrate competency in a core subject – like Math, English, Social Studies or Science.

The presumption, of course, is that students must always be taught one subject at a time and that content knowledge can only be transferred directly from teacher to student, most often by teachers lecturing from the front of a classroom to groups of 25 or 30 or more students sitting at desks organized in straight rows...as one student I know put it, “watching teachers work!”

This emphasis on subject-matter competency is problematic for any small high school – including thousands of already struggling rural high schools in all parts of the country.

But, it’s especially problematic for innovative charter and other high schools that use project-based learning, web-based curriculum or other interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning.

To address common concerns, Minnesota charters have joined with district alternative high schools and small rural school districts to propose a new type of license endorsement for teachers working in educational programs where students are not taught one subject at a time.

This endorsement will carry with it a list of very different kinds of competencies needed to be successful in very different kinds of teaching and learning environments... competencies around motivating and engaging students ...competencies around the use of technology...and com-

petencies around assisting students meet state content standards through projects and activities that cross traditional subject areas and through learning activities that engage the community and community resources... both in and outside the school.

As this discussion goes forward, in Minnesota and I hope elsewhere, education officials and teacher training institutions and programs should work with charter and other small school leaders to create new kinds of teaching credentials that are both rigorous and also relevant to different and effective models of teaching and learning.

These competencies presume a much different role for teachers -- acting more as facilitators of learning by students who are much more engaged in their work.

This vision of new opportunities and roles for teachers also includes the opportunity now being tested by small groups of teachers in Minnesota, Wisconsin, California and a few other states to be much more in charge of their lives as professionals.

In these pioneering schools, teachers have organized a cooperative or in one case a limited partnership to provide the learning program under contract with the non-profit organization that is that charter school and that legally holds the charter.

These teacher professional practices look and act more like a law firm or a medical practice than a traditional school. The traditional employer-employee model is gone. If there are administrators, they either work for the teachers or are equal members of the professional practice.

There's much more to see through this particular window than we have time to look at today. But, if you're interested, you should take a look at real schools now using this kind of Teacher Professional Practice model...in EdVisions Schools in Minnesota...in a unique arrangement with the school district in Milwaukee...and in at least one charter school in Southern California.

And, there's a book and other publications written by some of my colleagues as well as web sites and other good places to learn more.

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Well, if you're still with me, that just about completes our little walk around the block looking through ten somewhat cloudy windows at a work now in progress to produce our next generation of charter schools and the policy environment and foundation on which they will stand.

The bottom line of this little tour is that we now have the opportunity to become much more strategic and proactive in using chartering to create the number of new and different learning environments that we as a nation will need. Seizing that opportunity will require a second generation of policy leadership with ideas and commitment just as bold as the first.

The first generation of policy development around charter schools and chartering was a constant stream of give and take as states learned from and expanded upon the initiatives of others. Pennsylvania has been both a source and beneficiary of much of that exchange. We should all be proud of just how far we've come.

But, this is no time to sit back and watch others do the hard work now needed. Creating the second generation of charter schools and chartering will take the same kind of dedication that you and your colleagues have put into the first. Your students and your families and communities deserve nothing less.

Thank you all very much for this opportunity to be with you here today.

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