



# Real Impact: Student Opinions for a Change

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## Charter Students Inform Minnesota Legislators **“What’s important to understand about my school?” and “What motivates student learning?”**

Education/Evolving and the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (MACS) recently collaborated to organize and host the first-ever Minnesota Charter School Student Summit.

At the summit, more than a hundred Minnesota charter school students discussed the growth and challenges facing the charter movement Minnesota and nationally and reflected on keynote speaker Dr. Howard Fuller’s theory that there can be greater capacity to achieve needed changes in public education via chartered schools. Fuller is board chair of the Charter School Leadership Council and also the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). Both organizations are based in Washington, D.C.

Following Dr. Fuller’s opening remarks, students from more than two dozen Minnesota charters discussed their own experiences in chartered schools and exchanged ideas for improvement of the sector – both through a student reaction panel and in small groups facilitated and recorded by students.

At the end of the summit, evaluations asked students two underlying questions that could be used to inform legislators about chartered schools and what motivates students to learn. A summary of their responses follows.

### **If you could tell Minnesota legislators two things about chartered schools, what would you want them to know?**

Fifty-one students responded to this question and submitted ninety total comments.

Most students wanted legislators to know how much they like and appreciate their chartered schools. The schools are “doing good” and provide a “great alternative.” “Kids who do poorly in traditional schools can do well in a charter school,” said Alex Tarasar of Avalon Charter School in St. Paul. Zach Haak of E.C.H.O. Charter School said, “Chartered schools are wonderful learning environments for students that *want* to be there.”

Several said chartered schools are “fun” and “neat.” Others emphasized that chartered schools offer students “another nontraditional opportunity to learn.” Students like having choices and options—and chartered schools are a “good option.” “Without them, I wouldn’t be enrolled in school. They have helped me a lot,” said Stephanie Larson of RiverBend Academy in Mankato. Another added, “They have made the difference for me in caring about my education.”

The next most frequent response was that students would like legislators to be more aware of and supportive of chartered schools in general. Five students suggested that to do this

effectively, legislators will need to visit the schools. “They really need to see what [chartered schools] are, and not just look at our numbers,” said Sarah Candrall of High School for the Recording Arts in St. Paul. Several said, “Keep them” and “Keep supporting us.”

Others suggested that legislators ought to help spread the word about charter schools’ positive impacts and support increasing the number of schools. “Encourage/require school boards to be more open in receiving charter schools into the community,” one said.

Others wrote, “Tell more people” and “More of them need to exist.” Students were also concerned that legislators don’t consider chartered school students. “[Legislators] seriously need to think how they are affecting us when they make legal decisions,” said Crandall.

Nolan Nimps of Minnesota New Country School in Henderson encouraged legislators to consider supporting chartered schools as part of a strategy to improve Minnesota education overall. “It is a great way to evolve into a new educational program,” he said. Sarah Baalson of E.C.H.O. Charter School in Echo shared Nimps’s opinion. “They work! They’re not for everyone, but will improve education.”

The third most popular response indicated students’ desire for more resources at their school. Five mentioned the schools need “more money.” Four students said they would like bigger school buildings.

Four said they want better access to sports and other extra-curricular programs, but understand there are financial and political challenges to gaining such access. “Charter schools are faced with difficulties of incorporating after school programs,” said Eric Brandt of Ubah Medical Academy in Minneapolis.

A good number of students wanted legislators to know that their chartered schools support learning. Both Mariah Peltier of North Lakes Academy in Forest Lake and Javier Gordon of High School for Recording Arts in St. Paul said, “It’s easier to learn.” Mariah added that there are “fewer people who goof off.” Another stated, “It’s easier to learn on a personal level with teachers.”

Five students wanted legislators to understand that the supportive learning environment is likely due to the smaller size of the schools and classes. One student said chartered schools offer “higher learning.” Brenda Peters of the Minnesota Academy of Technology said, “Charter schools are the next step in a better informed America.” Kayla Peterson-Musa of Ubah Medical Academy said, “Charter schools meet students’ standards in learning.”

Several students noted that chartered schools meet their individual learning needs. A student from Riverway Learning Community in Minnesota City encouraged legislators to “keep meeting the individual needs of students” by supporting chartered schools. Tawni Annette from Liberty High School in Blaine thought legislators ought to know “how independent we [chartered school students] are.” Another stated, “All students don’t learn from the same experiences.”

### **If you could tell Minnesota legislators any two things about what motivates you to learn, what would you say?**

Two themes emerged as the biggest student motivators: teachers and the ability to participate in a learning program that matches their interests. While many students wrote just “teachers,” some chose to elaborate about teachers’ impact on their motivation to learn. Kristin L. Mock and

Zach Haak of E.C.H.O. Charter School said “one-on-one with teachers” and “individual attention” improves their motivation.

Jerome Peters, Jr. of High School for the Recording Arts in St. Paul said, “My teachers tell me positive things.” Alex Tarasar of Avalon Charter School, also in St. Paul said, “I am most motivated by knowing that if I don’t work I will disappoint my teachers, which leads to self-motivation.”

Learning programs that match students’ interests and/or offer unique experiences motivate students. “The unique experiences I’m allowed to have at E.C.H.O. Charter School” motivate Sarah Baalson. “Something unique offered through the school” also motivated Naima Farrar of the Minnesota Academy of Technology. “Being able to do my music,” said Jerome Peters.

Others said, “projects”, “learning what’s interesting to me”, “my options”, “being excited about what I am learning”, and “pursuing my interests.” Five students like being able to focus on a subject that interests them—music, photography, and reading to name a few.

A student-directed learning program also motivates students. Dera Moore of High School for the Recording Arts said she is motivated by “doing things on [her] own and being able to choose the work [she does].” Necole Rouse of the same school said, “Doing things on my own” makes a difference. Brenda Peters of the Minnesota Academy of Technology said “having the freedom to do what you want” motivates her. Another said, “being independent” is a big motivator.

Six students said they are simply “self-motivated.” Stephanie Larson of RiverBend Academy in Mankato said, “I motivate myself, because I love my school and want to prove people wrong when they say charter schools are bad.”

Clair Stoltman-Hamilton of the same school said, “It is all about how far you want to get in life.” Working with or competing with friends and classmates motivates five students, while four said their parents and family motivate them. Five are motivated by the “opportunities [learning] lends to [their] future.”

Several students said they are motivated to learn because knowledge increases their opportunity to change the world.

“Knowing how much I can impact my community” motivates Naima Farrar. “Making a positive difference in cultural dynamics” motivates Tyler Redrhard of Riverway Learning Community in Minnesota City. And “the possibility to do more” motivates Steven Dubois of E.C.H.O. Charter School.

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This report was prepared by EJE associate Kim Farris-Berg, who coordinates the Student Voices initiative.

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A summary of another summit discussion, “Students Describe Their Chartered School Experiences,” and additional papers and links highlighting student opinions on matters relating to their schools are available online at Education/Evolving’s new Web page.

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<http://www.educationevolving.org/studentvoices/>