



Healthy Charter Sector Belies Need for Commission, Extra Regulation

By Ben DeGrow

A new national report further undercuts the case for creating a politically appointed commission to dictate school enrollment decisions across the Motor City.

The Detroit Education Commission has been touted as part of the solution to rescue a failing education system. Proponents want to give the commission jurisdiction over all public schools within the city, including the ability to close charters it deems unsuccessful. In effect, the new governmental body would be empowered to take away options parents believe to be safer or otherwise better for their children.

On March 7, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan pitched the idea of a commission to a skeptical House Appropriations Committee. Fellow Democrat Rep. Harvey Santana pushed back on Duggan's call for the authority to appoint the commission's entire board.

The same day as the mayor's testimony, the nationwide trade group for charter schools gave Michigan high marks for the health of its public charter school sector. For the second consecutive year, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools ranked Michigan third in the nation. The group's analysis was based largely on the high-need student population charters serve and their demonstrated ability to increase academic growth.

The report attributed Michigan's strong rating in part to "a common set of comprehensive oversight and accountability standards" adopted by the nonprofit Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers. The council has worked to strengthen charter school oversight; recently, it introduced a new rigorous system of accreditation in partnership with AdvancED — the same organization that accredits Michigan's public intermediate school districts. The accreditation process, believed to be the first of its kind, may help lift Michigan's No. 3 ranking higher in future editions.

Ignoring this key upgrade, the advocacy group Education Trust-Midwest recently released a report calling for the state superintendent to follow through with his predecessor's threat to crack down on weaker charter authorizers. Ed Trust Executive Director Amber Arellano asserts that the 2011 lifting of the statewide charter cap and what she calls "Michigan's no-accountability approach" toward charter authorizers has created a chaotic environment in Detroit.

State Board of Education President John Austin used the same sort of rhetoric during his March 7 committee testimony, using the term "educational chaos" to describe the state of charter authorization in Michigan.

continued on back

Summary

Michigan's effort to rescue Detroit Public Schools threatens to limit the range of parental choice in education through creating a commission that could shut down charter schools in the city. Given the accolades recently given to Michigan's charter school sector by a national group, such a move is unnecessary.

Main text word count: 658

CHARTER SCHOOL RANKINGS IN THE U.S.

1. District of Columbia
2. Indiana
- 3. Michigan**
4. Massachusetts

Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

Michigan's charter school sector placed third in a recent national report.

But Ed Trust's heavy-handed proposal is a solution in search of a problem. A chart the organization produced and placed on its own website shows the rate of new charters opening on the decline, and authorizers to which it gave a grade of D or F opened no new schools at all in 2015. The trend depicted in the chart aligns with the conclusions of the alliance's analysis.

(Meanwhile, Ed Trust's report has been exposed for cherry-picking data in an attempt to downgrade the value of Michigan charter schools.)

Charter authorizers have already been working to police their own and help weaker authorizers raise their standards through accreditation. But there's one thing state lawmakers could do to tighten oversight of charter schools without also enabling aggressive bureaucratic regulation. The recent report from the alliance calls on Michigan to outlaw the practice of "authorizer shopping," a loophole through which some ineffective charter schools escape closure by seeking out a new authorizer with lower standards.

The Legislature could also increase accountability by adopting a statewide A-to-F school grading system that meaningfully measures student academic achievement and growth to provide parents with accurate, easy-to-understand pictures of performance. All district and charter schools should be graded on a consistent basis.

Detroit's charter schools as a whole already outperform their district school counterparts, though no one will dispute the need for further improvements citywide. Neither statewide bureaucratic authorizer oversight nor a politically appointed Detroit Education Commission promises to help. However, both could well quash the improvements charter operators and authorizers are making.

Parents, not politics, should be given the pre-eminent role in the school decision-making process. Let's focus on helping them by giving useful information and access to more quality options.

#####

Ben DeGrow is the education policy director at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Michigan. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the Mackinac Center are properly cited.

Parents, not politics, should be given the pre-eminent role in the school decision-making process.

Attention Editors and Producers

Viewpoint commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications. Authors are available for print or broadcast interviews. Electronic text is available for this Viewpoint at mackinac.org/pubs/viewpoints.

Please contact:

MICHAEL VAN BEEK
Director of Research
140 West Main Street
P.O. Box 568
Midland, Mich. 48640

Phone: 989-631-0900
Fax: 989-631-0964
VanBeek@mackinac.org

Mackinac.org
Facebook.com/MackinacCenter
Twitter.com/MackinacCenter