

Center for Education Reform

Charter Schools: a New Option in Maryland

In 2003 the Maryland General Assembly passed the Maryland Charter Law. It tells the Baltimore City Public School System to review applications for charter schools. Baltimore City will start reviewing applications this year; and will approve the first charters to open in September 2005.

What is a charter school?

A charter school is a public school. It is created by the school board in response to a proposal from a non-profit, or a group of parents and/or teachers. It serves City residents who are admitted by a lottery. It is accountable to produce measurable results in academic achievement. It is different from other schools in important ways. The charter school has control over its curriculum, management of the school and some of the budget. The teachers are city certified teachers who are represented by the union like other teachers, but they are selected by the operator of the charter school and agree to participate in the mission of the school.

What are the benefits of charter schools?

Charter schools give parents more choices. They have the flexibility to address the particular needs of their students, for example with different teaching strategies or a longer school day. They can be started relatively quickly to help alleviate overcrowding in existing neighborhood schools. A charter school can only continue if parents choose it - that increases its accountability to the community. If it does not meet its academic objectives the BCPSS can close it - that increases its accountability to BCPSS, as well as to families.

How does a charter get started?

Usually, a group of parents and teachers start talking about what they would do if they had more control over the management of a school. To move forward, they need to create a non-profit organization or find an agency that will help. They need to do a tremendous amount of learning about management, curriculum, contracts and more. The process of creating an organization and getting through the application process is very hard but very rewarding.

Another option is for a whole school community in an existing school – principal, teachers and families – to come together and decide how they want the school managed with more independence from many school system rules. They can re-organize the curriculum, decide what professional development they need and how parents will be involved in the day to day management of the school. This would be a **conversion** of a school to charter status. .

In either case, parents and leaders need to organize to fight for autonomy, a fair amount of money and flexible policies.

How do I find out more?

There are already some groups in Baltimore planning to apply to open a charter school. It is important that this option be available to all communities in Baltimore. If you would like to talk about this at your church, community organization or home, please call me.

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