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Where the School Boards Association is Right

By Chris Braunlich

1/29/2010 – Charter school advocates – myself included – are often critical of the resistance local School Boards offer these independent public schools designed to serve often under-educated student populations in systems trying to educate a broad range of children.

And because local school boards are the only entity empowered to authorize charter schools, the state is currently a vast wasteland for quality charter innovation that could help kids. School board members have made it clear to me that they would even refuse to authorize the nationally-renowned [KIPP Academies](#) – even if it means the low-income and educationally at-risk students in their systems would continue to fail.

But while the criticism of school boards is well-founded, the Virginia School Boards Association is right on this: The quality of the charter applications that are received by local boards is often quite poor.

Let's leave aside the [KIPPs](#), [Amistad Academies](#), and [Harlem Democracy Preps](#) of the world - all of which have helped poor students become good students and get into college. We're not talking about them here. But too many charter applicants in Virginia have an amateur quality to them – almost like the old black and white Judy Garland-Mickey Rooney films where they shout “Oh boy, let's put on a show,” and then throw up some old blankets in the barn for a curtain.

Garland and Rooney may have been able to magically produce Broadway-quality productions, but it doesn't work that way in education. Folks might be well-intentioned in trying to open a school, but a poorly-written application that ignores key educational requirements isn't going to help kids.

A lot of the blame lands at the feet of the application process. Scripted into law more than a decade ago, charter application requirements are too often vague and lack specificity, fail to demand quality-centered metrics and inadequately describe what is expected – either in the application or in the schools' performance.

The result is frustration and confusion on the part of applicants, as well as school boards and their staff.

Fortunately, the [National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#) (NAPCS) has now issued not only a new model law for high-quality public charter schools but also an analysis of Virginia's strengths and weaknesses. While previous charter law reviews published by the [Center for Education Reform](#) focused on a school's freedom from regulation, the NAPCS focuses on the elements likely to make a school successful in teaching kids: performance and accountability.

[Among the application components it suggests](#) Virginia's law lacks, is a thorough evaluation of each application, including an in-person interview. It also suggests that charter contracts need to define "academic and operational performance expectations by which the school will be judged, based on a performance framework that includes measures and metrics for, at minimum, student academic proficiency and growth, achievement gaps, attendance, recurrent enrollment, postsecondary readiness (high schools), financial performance and (charter school) board stewardship (including compliance)."

That's a mouthful – but things like transparency, performance, monitoring and data collection are the sorts of things that divide quality charters from weakly conceived charters. The NAPCS language offers a pathway towards improving the chartering process in Virginia, and one that cries out for the Governor and members of the General Assembly – even those who have sworn to oppose charter schools – to work together.

No school board or school system staff should have to waste time on a poorly-devised charter application. And no charter applicant should have to play guessing games wondering how language is defined and what the intent of the law might be.

Making application requirements clear up front would save time and effort for both parties, eliminating poor applications and applicants without the capacity to make a school work. That ought to be a goal both sides can agree on in the charter school debate to come.

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