

# **Evaluating Charter Schools:**

## **A comprehensive Approach**

### **Introduction**

Cesar Chavez Public Charter High School has been open for four years. It is one of the 39 charter schools in the District of Columbia. Its 223 students comprise 2.5 percent of the nearly 9,000 students in the DC public charter school system.<sup>1</sup> After next year, Cesar Chavez may be subject to closure based on its performance as a school. Like any charter school in the District of Columbia, Chavez will be reviewed after its fifth year of operation. The DC Public Charter School Board will assess Chavez's academic and organizational accomplishments and based on that review, determine whether the school should continue to exist.

As members of the Chavez community, we must educate ourselves so that we understand the process our school undergoes in order to continue operating. As participants in the progressive charter school movement, we must understand the principles behind accountability and evaluation, because those concepts govern our learning.

Charter schools across the country are under heavy scrutiny. The fledgling charter school movement is being held to high standards and high stakes accountability measures. Yet the processes that determine school performance waver and vary throughout the country. No one knows whether the DC method of evaluating schools is more accurate than any other. No one knows whether DC standards stimulate educational growth, or whether they stifle it. Still, Chavez has been evaluated through DC methods and must meet DC standards. Are the decisions of the DC Public Charter School Board valid based on their academic standards and

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<sup>1</sup> "School Demographic Data 2000-2001" As reported by public charter schools under the authority of the DC Public Charter School Board in their 2000-2001 annual reports, and data from interview of Linda McKay, Executive Director of the DC Board of Education, Charter Schools.

accountability measures? Will the major decision that will settle Chavez's future be an accurate one?

This paper examines the accountability measures and evaluation methods of the DC Public Charter School Board, as well as two other proposed methods of evaluation and accountability. Though the three proposals present valuable ideas, none of them is viable as the only form of evaluation for a school district. As a result of the analysis, I have decided that a combination of the three proposals would be the best solution to the charter school dilemma: how will charter schools be best evaluated?

### **Definition & Background Information**

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are free to set their own curricula and policies. In most states they are overseen by the local board of education and/or the local charter school board; many states allow universities to grant charters and evaluate schools. Charter schools, unlike public schools, must report to their own board of directors, which is composed of parents and community members.

Charter schools can usually be opened by anyone in the community, once they apply for and receive a charter from the charter issuer; some laws require that charter applicants be educators or a group of parents, for example. People open charter schools for various reasons, and charter schools attempt to address numerous educational needs. One common reason to open a charter school is to escape the bureaucracy of the public school system. At charter schools, students, teachers, and school officials can avoid some of the controls imposed by public school systems. Charter schools remain public schools, but are free to educate their students by methods other than those required in public schools.

Charter schools receive public funding from the local government. Nevertheless, funding is a problem for most charter schools. On average, they are allotted “only 90 percent or less of the local district’s per-pupil allocation.”<sup>2</sup> Charter schools are under-funded in addition to bearing the “burden of capital costs” such as facilities, transportation, and equipment.<sup>3</sup> Finding an adequate building is a major problem for new and growing charter schools.<sup>4</sup> In the District of Columbia, charter schools must compete against businesses for space in the saturated real estate market. Despite charter schools’ public status, they are not allowed to access DC’s many unused public school buildings.

Charter schools are often heavily opposed by the local public school systems. Many people have argued that charter schools force public schools to compete for their students. Thus, charter schools are accused of “creaming” the best public school students.

This is seldom the case. DC charter schools are prohibited from requiring entrance exams or other such enrollment requirements. All the charter schools in DC have a majority of low-income students. They all have more than 90% minority students, and only one school has a less than 50% African American population.<sup>5</sup>

The first charter law was passed in Minnesota in 1991. Since then, 28 states and the District of Columbia have established charter laws. As of fall 2001, there are 2,357 charter schools in the country.<sup>6</sup> Since the “DC Public Charter Schools Act of 1996” was passed, 39 charter schools have been opened in Washington, DC.<sup>7</sup> DC has two charter issuers: the DC

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<sup>2</sup> Pearl Rock Kane, “Charter Schools: Paying Attention to Ancillary Funds,” *Education Week*, Oct. 14, 1998

<sup>3</sup> Kane, “Charter Schools,”

<sup>4</sup> Kane, “Charter Schools”

<sup>5</sup> “School Demographic Data 2001” and interview of Linda McKay

<sup>6</sup> Allen, Jeanne. “The Center for Education Reform: Charter School Highlights and Statistics,” *The Center for Education Reform Homepage*, 5 March 2002 <<http://edreform.com/pubs/chglance.htm>> (26 February 2002)

<sup>7</sup> Interviews of Tamera Lumpkin, Interim Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board and Linda McKay

Board of Education, and the DC Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB). Each issuer can approve up to 10 applications a year. Today, the DC PCSB oversees 23 of the 39 charter schools in the District,<sup>8</sup> and the Board of Education oversees 16.<sup>9</sup> The two issuers employ very similar methods of evaluation based on similar standards. Both issuers review schools each year to assess performance, financial management, and compliance to law. After five years, charter schools are reviewed to determine whether they have fulfilled their charters and should be permitted to continue operating. If schools have failed to meet their academic goals, their charters may be revoked in the sixth year.

The DC Board of Education also oversees the schools in the DC Public Schools System. Although the DCPS schools are not continually evaluated, like charter schools, they are held to federally mandated standards. There is a system-wide accountability plan for DCPS schools, which requires schools to meet certain standards for attendance, test scores, etc. These standards vary throughout the schools in the system; each Principal writes a performance plan for their school outlining the school's unique goals. DCPS performance plans are comparable to charter schools' accountability plans, which outline schools' goals and are used to measure schools' performance in their fifth years. Though traditional DCPS schools are not subject to closure based on performance or accountability, they face reconstitution, a process that removes a school's principal and requires its teachers to reapply for their positions.<sup>10</sup> Teachers are not individually accountable for their students' test scores, and are eligible for a teaching position so long as they have completed their certifications.

All schools in the DC Public Schools System--including all charter schools in DC-- must administer the Stanford 9 test. The test is taken in the fall and the spring of every year by

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<sup>8</sup> Tamara Lumpkin (Interview)

<sup>9</sup> Linda McKay (Interview)

students in third, sixth, eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades. The Stanford 9 is designed to measure student improvement over the course of each year. It consists of a language section and a math section, and scores children on a scale of performance standards from below basic to advanced. Schools in DC are accountable for the percentage of students who score above basic on the Stanford 9 each year.

### **Why do we evaluate schools?**

School evaluation systems are created to differentiate failing schools--schools that are not providing good educations--from successful ones. When failing schools are identified, the educational methods they use can be revised or thrown out, and the methods at successful schools can be strengthened. The long-term goal of school evaluation is to improve the quality of education.

The long-term goal of charter school evaluation is also to improve education. Charter schools are supposed to be methods of school reform. They are usually innovative schools that implement new teaching methods and progressive policies. Charter school evaluators seek to determine which of these innovations are worthwhile. Furthermore, charter school evaluation also determines whether charter schools in general are valuable, or if the charter school system should be eliminated. On a financial level, evaluation of charter schools allows school districts to avoid funding ineffective schools.

One problem with the charter school evaluation system is that there is no evaluation technique proven to assess school performance fairly and accurately. Districts have no indication of the quality of their evaluation standards and assessment methods. Despite the unconfirmed evaluation methods, most states' charters are so new that they have yet to see

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<sup>10</sup> Linda McKay (Interview)

results from schools to which they can apply their standards. So they have yet to determine whether their assessment approaches are valid, or whether they should be revised. In most cases, evaluators receive large amounts of data about schools, but do not know how to interpret the numbers. Therefore, they have concrete evidence of school performance, but do not know whether the performance is good or bad.

In discussing topics such as education reform and effective methods of evaluation, we tend to lose sight of the true purpose of the discussion. We evaluate schools to ensure that they provide a superior education to young people in the country. Poor evaluation methods and ineffective schools are really failing young people. Accurately evaluating teaching procedures, curricula, programs, and standards allows us to serve individuals by better meeting their needs, and maximizing the quality of their education. The benefits of good evaluation methods are boundless. Conversely, the costs of poor evaluation methods are tragic. They include the wasted talents of young Americans and their teachers, and the prolonging of poverty.

### **Proposed Solutions**

There are many proposed solutions to the charter school evaluation dilemma. A noteworthy idea comes from a group of researchers at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. The researchers, Chester E. Finn, Jr., Louann A. Bierlein, Bruno V. Manno, and Gregg Vanourek propose a system of transparency where shared information allows communities to evaluate schools. The most prominent proposal comes from President Bush, who reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act earlier this year. This plan relies heavily on standardized testing as an assessment of schools and students. Finally, the DC Public Charter

School Board has implemented a system of periodic review as a form of charter school evaluation for DC schools which can serve as a model for other school districts.

**Proposal 1: Transparency**

In an article called "Accountability Via Transparency: Solving a Charter School Puzzle,"<sup>11</sup> Finn, Manno, and Vanourek propose that schools should be "transparent" in order to be evaluated effectively. "Transparency" in charter schools would mean that schools and charter issuers share as much information as possible with the public, especially parents. Schools would be responsible for publishing information including their charters, missions, average test scores, and other indicators of school performance. Charter issuers (such as school boards) would also publish information such as the criteria used to administer and renew charters, the schedules and minutes of meetings, and their accountability methods.

Transparency in charter schools would have various benefits. First, communities would be able to judge schools better because they could see schools' performance for themselves. Parents would be able to decide, based on evidence, which schools provide the best educations. This would allow communities to hold schools accountable through enrollment numbers. Finn, Manno, and Vanourek liken the evaluation of transparent charter schools to the free market system. Schools that do not perform well would lose students, and would eventually be forced to close due to low enrollment. Transparency, because it creates a sort of market for education, would preclude school closings by charter issuers. Schools would shut down because of market forces, and issuers would seldom have to intervene.

Also, transparency allows schools to be assessed based on more than one method. For example, evaluators would not have to depend solely on test scores to determine schools' abilities

to educate. Transparency would allow parents to determine whether schools are failing or succeeding without using a test. Because transparency puts power in parents' hands, schools would have to prove themselves to parents in order to remain open. They would have to prove their general success as opposed to success on a specific test. This would prevent judgment based solely on test scores, or other assessment results that could distort perceptions of student achievement. Pressure would be taken off schools to perform only on standardized tests, for example, and placed on schools' abilities to provide good overall education.

Transparency creates a means for schools to be evaluated without imposing an assessment method other than enrollment figures. However, there are some major gaps that would need to be filled if charter issuers depended solely on transparency to assess schools.

Transparency requires the exchange of information. Finn, Manno, and Vanourek do not suggest how this would take place. Should there be a forum reserved specifically for the transmission of information? Would there have to be a cable channel dedicated to charter schools? An internet site? There would never be a guarantee that everyone in the community would have access to that forum. Therefore, there is no way to guarantee that parents are informed about the charter schools in their communities.

Even if the information were available to a large enough number of parents, there is no guarantee that they will take advantage of it. Transparency relies on the assumption that parents are engaged and involved in students' schooling and education. However, in many school districts, parent disinterest is the norm. Without parents actively evaluating the information made available by transparency, enrollment figures could belie school performance.

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<sup>11</sup>Chester E. Finn, Jr., Bruno V. Manno, and Gregg Vanourek, "Accountability Via Transparency: Solving a Charter School Puzzle," *Education Week*, 26 April 2000, <<http://www.edweek.com/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=33manno.h19&keywords=Finn>> (12 February 2002)

Even when parents are involved, they must be able to correctly assess school performance. They would have to understand the teaching methods employed by the schools, and the philosophies behind them. They would have to understand the obstacles that the schools face in order to reach the goals in their missions. They would have to understand the needs of the student body, including discipline issues, learning disorders, disabilities, etc. Those parents would also have to correctly evaluate the standards and methods employed by the charter issuers.

This is not impossible. However, it is very unlikely that enough parents will be interested, and have time to become active, knowledgeable members of the school community. Who would take on the responsibility of educating parents, or would parents have to do it themselves?

Also, parents' tastes could be satisfied by a single element of a school-- small class sizes, for example. Then, despite the school's failure in other areas, such as math education or safety, parents would still enroll their child in that school because of the class size. The school would remain open even though its performance was generally unsatisfactory.

Without the full involvement of parents who are educated in schools' individual situations, transparency would not be a feasible evaluation method. Parents who do not participate in or fully understand their childrens' schools would not be efficient "consumers" in the market for education. If, through their enrollment choices, parents were unreliable indicators of school performance, charter issuers would need to assess schools based on more than enrollment figures. Transparency would not be viable on its own; it would have to be coupled with another assessment method.

Transparency also relies on trust that schools and charter issuers are releasing accurate information. However, this would not always be the case, because both rely on charter school

enrollment for survival. Both schools and their evaluators would want to put their best faces forward, and would be tempted to release only positive data. Transparency would require a separate entity to review the information provided to the community. This entity could take the form of a committee on the school board; however, the charter issuer is one of the groups that need to be transparent. So, the information released by schools and charter issuers through transparency would have to be appraised by a separate group. That group would have to regulate what information was published, in addition to its accuracy. The appraisal group would have to enforce requirements as to which information is published.

The existence of this third group lessens the value of the charter issuer. If the appraiser already reviews information on charter schools, what does the school board do? If the market forces of enrollment are dictating school closure, what does the charter issuer do? Transparency diminishes the need for the charter issuer. In effect, the third party would end up acting as the charter issuer. So, who would evaluate their data?

The foundation of transparency is that communities would judge charter schools for themselves, and hold schools accountable through enrollment. The problem is that not every school in a community would be transparent, only the charter schools. Parents would not be able to compare charter schools to the traditional public and private schools in their communities. Public schools would not be held accountable by the "market forces" of enrollment, and would not face closure. Only charter schools would be under heavy scrutiny by the community.

Despite that inequality, many parents choose to enroll students in charter schools because they are deemed by the community to be a better alternative to other schools, such as traditional public schools. Due to that fact, enrollment numbers do not currently represent the forces of a "free market." This concept assumes that parents have other options. However, it may be the

case that in parents' eyes, even a low-performing charter school is doing better than a traditional public school, and thus enrollment keeps the charter school open despite poor performance.

Unless there is a large number of charter schools in a community for parents to compare, charter enrollment may thrive based on comparison with traditional schools that are perceived to be failing.

Transparency is a useful tool for evaluating charter schools. However, it cannot be the sole form of assessment because of the many factors that could distort perception, and thus enrollment figures. Another method of assessment would have to be employed in conjunction with transparency in order for it to aid in school evaluation.

### **Proposal 2: "No Child Left Behind" and Standardized Testing**

President Bush recently reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) containing a strategic education plan dubbed "No Child Left Behind." This plan relies heavily on standardized testing that would measure students based on national standards. The ESEA requires states to create an accountability plan, a system that rewards schools for high performance and punishes them for poor performance on standardized tests. The students in various groups (such as racial, ethnic, economic, and disability) would have to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) on standardized tests.<sup>12</sup> By the 2012-2013 school year, all students in each state must meet their state's proficiency level in order for the state to meet AYP requirements. Individual schools would be held accountable for their students' scores, and would face school closure or reconstitution based on student achievement on standardized tests.

This plan also has various benefits. The most obvious is that it puts the entire nation on the same playing field—everyone is evaluated based on the same criteria. This is especially

important for charter schools. Unlike transparency, standardized testing allows charter schools to be equitably compared to all other schools in the community. This combats a problem that transparency exacerbates: with standardized testing, charter schools are under no more scrutiny than traditional schools.

Along those same lines, all students are measured on the same scale under Bush's plan. There is no subjectivity when testing students-- they must all meet designated standards. Test results are incontestable evidence of student performance, and thus, school performance.

However, standardized tests are not perfectly objective. Students in low-income areas where schools receive less funding are not as likely to do well on tests. Because of this, schools are not measured equally. Charter schools in low-income areas that serve poor or minority students are most likely to be shut down based on the "No Child Left Behind" plan.<sup>13</sup> This could be partially remedied by testing student improvement over time (AYP), but testing initially sets some students behind, and makes it harder for schools to meet the 12 year AYP requirements. Schools that serve at-risk students are more vulnerable to closure based on test scores.

Another problem is that standardized testing does not always show student ability. There are myriad ways for schools to inflate their scores without students actually making progress. The first way to raise scores without improving academics is teaching to the test. If schools are measured based on their students' test scores, they are more likely to build their curricula around information that students need to pass tests. Then the question arises: are students learning what they need to know, or are they learning what they need to know to score high on state tests? Standardized testing creates a disincentive for schools to provide a well-rounded education.

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<sup>12</sup> Dan Goldhaber (*The Urban Institute*), "What Might Go Wrong with the Accountability Measures of the 'No Child Left Behind Act?'" *Will No Child Truly Be Left Behind? Conference*, 13 February 2002  
<<http://www.edexcellence.net/NCLBconference/NCLBconferenceindex.html#Figlio>> (15 February 2002)

<sup>13</sup> Especially if they are new charter schools with no longitudinal data to show improvement.

Instead, they would focus on test scores and the material needed to raise them. This is not so much of a problem if the test in question is a well-developed one. However, if students are learning tested material or test-taking skills at the expense of valuable material not included on tests, teaching to the test puts students at an educational disadvantage.<sup>14</sup>

Schools can also inflate scores by focusing on borderline students. AYP requires that all students in each state meet the state's proficient level by the 2012-2013 school year. This requirement encourages teachers to focus on improving the scores of students who are just under the threshold of proficiency. Students who are too far below the bar could be neglected.<sup>15</sup>

Also, despite the AYP requirement that *all* students meet the proficient level in twelve years, schools could manipulate their testing pools. Many states have "obtained waivers from [the AYP] requirements or ignored them all together."<sup>16</sup> As a result, students with low English proficiency and students with disabilities are not tested in many states, thus falsely inflating the state's scores. Schools can also manipulate the testing pools by retaining students from the tested grades (third through twelfth, separated into three groups: 3-5, 6-9, 10-12)<sup>17</sup> and rushing high-performing students into them. The problem with this is that retention increases the probability that students will drop out of high school.<sup>18</sup>

The main problem with standardized testing as the means of evaluation is that tests are inflexible. They do not provide measurement of teacher qualification, or class size. Nor do they show re-enrollment figures, which exemplify student and parent satisfaction. Standardized testing makes schools all about numbers. When those numbers are biased, or misrepresentative of actual ability, good schools are at risk of unwarranted closure. If standardized testing plans

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<sup>14</sup> Goldhaber, "What Might Go Wrong with 'No Child Left Behind,'" 13 February 2002

<sup>15</sup> Goldhaber, "What Might Go Wrong with 'No Child Left Behind,'" 13 February 2002

<sup>16</sup> Goldhaber, "What Might Go Wrong with 'No Child Left Behind,'" 13 February 2002

like the “No Child Left Behind” Act were implemented as the only methods of evaluation in school districts, schools could seem to be educating students at higher levels than are really the case. For those reasons, testing cannot be used as the sole method of evaluation for charter schools.

### **Proposal 3: The DC Public Charter School Board**

The District of Columbia's charter school law is credited with being the fourth strongest in the nation, and received a grade of "A" from the Center for Education Reform.<sup>19</sup> As mentioned earlier, the charter schools in the District of Columbia are overseen by two charter issuers: the District's Board of Education and the DC Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB). Each Board may approve up to 10 applications per year. The DC PCSB currently oversees 23 of the 39 charter schools in the city. The Board of Education monitors 16 schools on 19 campuses. (The Edison school has multiple campuses.)

According to Tamera Lumpkin, the Interim Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board, the DC PCSB has a multi-faceted process of evaluating its schools. Its method is very similar to that of the DC Board of Education, as reported by Linda McKay, the Executive Director of the DC Board of Education, Charter Schools.

In order for each board to grant a charter, school founders must submit an application which establishes the school's mission and its unique accountability plan. The accountability plan outlines the school's goals regarding re-enrollment rates, attendance, discipline standards and actions (suspension and expulsion rates), the futures of its students related to the school's

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<sup>17</sup> US Department of Education, *Official Website*, 2002 <<http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/overview/>> (19 April 2002)

<sup>18</sup> Goldhaber, “What Might Go Wrong with ‘No Child Left Behind,’” 13 February 2002

<sup>19</sup> The Center for Education Reform, *CER Online*, 9 November 2001, <<http://edreform.com/press/2001/csllaws.htm>> (7 January 2002)

mission (if the school is a college prep school or a trade school), and any other goals. The accountability plan as it appears in the application is only a draft, and is revised and approved after the school has been open for two or three years.

DC charters are granted for 15 years, during which schools undergo various levels of evaluation. The major academic evaluations occur in the fifth, tenth, and fifteenth years. According to DC law, both the DC PCSB and the DC Board of Education review schools every five years to decide whether a school has met its academic goals or whether its charter should be revoked. Any school closures that occur in the first five years of a school's existence are usually due to compliance failures. The DC PCSB and the Board of Education review schools' financial management, compliance with DC and U.S. laws such as fire codes, and any other gross misuse of schools' charters by conducting an annual audit.

At the end of the first year, schools overseen by the DC PCSB review their performance in a self-study. Often, schools' plans and policies shift throughout their early years as they adjust to the realities of their situations. The DC PCSB sends a review team to assess a school and its performance according to the tentative goals in the application's accountability plan, and to determine whether the school has been faithful to its charter. The review team exchanges information with the school. The schools, the review teams, and the DC PCSB consider the results of the self-studies when reviewing schools' accountability plans, which are revisited and finalized in their second or third years after baseline data accumulates. The review team will submit a memo of its findings and recommendations to the Charter School Board each year.

In November of the second year a charter school is open (and each November that follows), it is required that the school submit an Annual Report to the DC PCSB. The Annual Report is a public document that details the school's test scores, attendance, and general

performance in the first year related to its accountability plan. The Report also describes the programs offered, faculty and staff credentials, curriculum, special achievements, and any other pertinent information. The Annual Report serves as a guide for a school to modify its programs in order to meet the targets in the newly revised plan by the school's fifth year of operation.

At the end of the second year, the review team returns to compare the school's performance to the results of the previous review, the Annual Report, and the accountability plan's targets. That process is repeated until the fifth year, when the stakes are higher. The DC PCSB decides in the fifth year whether the school should have its charter revoked or should be allowed to continue for five additional years. The fifth year review focuses on academic achievement at the school, whereas the previous evaluations track progress and look toward the future. Lumpkin said that substantial progress towards a school's goals is necessary for charter renewal. However, 100 percent achievement is not always necessary. The DC PCSB will renew a charter when a school has met approximately eighty percent of its targets, or has met each target by eighty percent.

The DC PCSB combines the data from the schools in its jurisdiction and publishes its own Annual Report. This report is a composite of the schools and includes average Stanford 9 scores, school performance reports, finance information, attendance enrollment data and other information. The DC PCSB Annual Report is published through its website, its office, and its press releases. The Board must also submit an Annual Report of its schools to Congress, the DC City Council, and the DC Mayor.

The DC Public Charter School Board's method of evaluation is very valuable because it allows schools to remain autonomous while being held accountable for performance.<sup>20</sup> It also is flexible, allowing for adjustment of goals to let schools set high yet reasonable standards for

themselves. The DC PCSB evaluation system gives time for schools to show real results before taking any action.

Unfortunately, the time factor is the DC PCSB's major fault. The first charter review does not occur until the fifth year of a school's existence. Five years is enough time for an entire high school class to graduate. It is enough time for elementary and middle schools to move students on to the next educational level. Five years allows failing, low-performing schools to affect hundreds of students' lives before the flaws in educational programs are detected.

### **My Solution**

The three proposed solutions to the charter school dilemma offer valuable ideas on how to evaluate charter schools. However, each of them has gaps that need to be filled.

Transparency is not viable because it relies too heavily on parent involvement, and because it does not allow communities to compare charter schools to all other schools in the district. The "No Child Left Behind" Act and standardized testing are not viable because of the many ways that test scores can misrepresent student ability and school performance. The DC Public Charter School Board's method of evaluation is very flexible and is easily applicable to other charter laws. It considers schools' individuality and allows schools to develop autonomously, but it allows too much time for failing schools to continue educating students poorly.

In order to correct the flaws in each of the three proposals, and to reap the benefits of the three valuable ideas, a combination of the proposals can be manufactured. This combination would entail (1) transparency for public schools, charter schools and charter issuers, (2) standardized testing in every school in the district, (3) periodic review of schools by the charter

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<sup>20</sup> Tamera Lumpkin (Interview)

issuer and by traditional school boards for traditional public schools, and (4) periodic self-review by public and charter schools.

### **Transparency for Charter and Public Schools**

Transparency would be achieved in both traditional and charter schools through the transmission of information from the school to the community. First, charter schools must publish their mission statements and accountability plans. Public schools must also develop accountability plans, similar to the “performance plans” developed by traditional DC public schools. The accountability plans would vary from school to school depending on mission statements and populations served, but would include basic general data. Accountability plans should outline goals for attendance, test scores, college acceptance (if applicable), discipline standards, re-enrollment rates, and parent satisfaction. The plans would also summarize schools’ curricula and teaching methods. This measure allows parents and communities to choose schools that will benefit them most through comparing student interest and the focus of the school. Parents can measure where their student will best fit in by comparing schools’ goals with their children’s interests, ability, and achievement.

All schools would be required to publish a roster of their faculty, including teachers’ certifications and qualifications. This allows communities to assess the quality of teaching in schools. The rosters should also include all members of the schools’ staff and management, especially administration. They should document their teaching methods and the philosophies behind them.

In order to achieve transparency, all schools must make active efforts to transmit their information. Each must hold information sessions three times a year to explain and discuss their programs, teaching methods, and other aspects of the school such as discipline and safety. These

meetings would most likely be directed mainly toward parents, but must be advertised to the community at-large and open to those outside the immediate school community. The meetings must also address the schools' accountability and performance plans, and the progress they are making toward their goals. The schools should invite the media to these meetings so that those who do not attend may learn the information. Information sessions should have an average attendance of a quarter of the school's population.

Schools must also publish their test scores, including improvement indicators (longitudinal data). They must make communities aware of the size of the school, the average class size, the school's demographics, and other general but important information about the school.

### **Transparency for the Charter Issuer**

The DC PCSB makes attempts at transparency by holding press releases and by posting their data about schools' test scores and its Annual Reports on the DC PCSB website.<sup>21</sup> The Board must also submit an Annual Report to DC and federal officials. However, in order to achieve transparency there should be a proactive outreach to the DC community and parents of DC public school students to ensure that they are receiving information about charter schools.

Charter issuers, as well as traditional public school boards, must announce meetings to the community twice a year. In these meetings Board representatives would explain and discuss the accountability and evaluation measures employed by the Board. The Board must publish this information. When enrolling their children in schools, parents should know the standards to which the schools will be held. The school board should provide parents with materials that summarize the accountability procedures. They should know the methods that evaluators use to

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<sup>21</sup> The DC PCSB website is <[www.dcpubliccharter.com](http://www.dcpubliccharter.com)>

determine school performance so that they can make educated judgements and educated decisions about enrollment.

Also, the Board must publish a newsletter in November, February, and May outlining the progress of its schools and other news. They should distribute the names of the schools they oversee and general information about those schools. This newsletter would include an up-to-date schedule of meetings, which should always be open to the public.

In addition to the meetings and the newsletter, the Board must have another forum dedicated to transmitting information. Whether it is a website or another medium, it must be kept up-to-date and allow for comments and discussion. This website must make available all the published documents and evaluation methods, and include contact information for Board officials and each of the schools.

### **Accountability for Traditional Public Schools**

In order for parents to make educated choices about schools, all schools must be measured on comparable scales. Transparency and strict evaluation for charter schools would be meaningless if parents could not compare that information to all other schools in their communities. Traditional public schools must also be transparent and be held to similar standards.

First, traditional public schools must have accountability plans. The public schools in DC have such documents, called performance plans. These performance plans may vary between schools because of school populations and resources. However, the public school accountability plans must include the same information as charter school plans listed above. Public schools must go through a system of review similar to that used by the DC PCSB, as outlined in “Proposal 3.” The schools must be evaluated every two years by a review team that

tracks their performance and compares it to the performance plans. For the first three years that this procedure is implemented, public schools must be evaluated every year.

Failure to meet the goals in the performance plan after three years would result in reconstitution. However, the consequences of reconstitution would be more severe. The principal of a reconstituted school would be removed, as would its entire faculty. The faculty (teachers) would be permitted to reapply for their positions. In the reapplication process, the Board must consider the education, certification and qualifications of the teachers. Also, the Board must conduct teacher interviews, and evaluate the teaching technique of its applicants. This evaluation would take place on three separate occasions, in the form of class observations by school board representatives.

After the three-year intensive period, public schools will be monitored every other year. Reconstitution will occur if the school fails to meet its goals after four years. Once the reconstitution process is complete, the school will go on a three year probation period, where it is monitored intensely, as during the three year intensive period. After that, review will take place every other year.

Charter schools are subject to review every year. This is necessary as a new charter school establishes itself. However, once a charter school has been open for 10 years, it no longer needs to be subject to stringent annual reviews. Instead, charter schools would be reviewed every other year after their tenth years.

### **School Self-Evaluation**

The DC PCSB's method of self-evaluation for schools is extremely valuable. It allows schools to reflect on their actions and the steps that need to be taken to meet their goals and

fulfill their charters. Public and charter schools should periodically review themselves, and formally report their findings to their school boards.

Self-review would occur in the first year for a charter school and for a public school in a three-year intensive or probation period. The self-review process would entail extensive evaluation of performance in relation to the school's accountability plan and Annual Reports. The self-review process must include teacher evaluations by students and by other teachers. These evaluations would be considered when teachers reapply for their positions after reconstitution, and when charter schools undergo major five-year reviews. Self-review must also include evaluations of schools' programs and policies by parents, by students, and by teachers. Students would also evaluate the administration and management of the school. School districts would determine standard data to be included in satisfaction surveys. This would allow for easy comparison between schools.

The self-review process would culminate in a report to the school board or charter issuer. The board should monitor accuracy of data in self-studies, then publish the self-review data, and consider it when making decisions regarding the school. The results of the teacher and school evaluations must be reported to the school board and published on the school's website and in the board's forum. After the three year intensive or probation period of a public school, the self-review process would take place every other year, alternating with the school board's review. For charter schools, self-review procedures will be included in every other Annual Report after the first year self-study.

### **Minimal Standardized Testing**

Standardized testing is a necessary component of the evaluation system proposed here. Because every school's accountability and performance plan will be unique, testing allows a flat

measurement of performance to compare schools equally. The importance of testing will be far less than in the “No Child Left Behind” plan. Evaluators will not put as much weight on test scores because they will be considered in conjunction with other forms of evaluation.

All students in a district will be required to take no more than two tests each year. If the school district chooses to use two different tests, the students will still be tested no more than twice (not twice per test).<sup>22</sup> Goals related to student test scores will be included in schools’ accountability plans, and reported together with other information required for transparency. These goals will be reviewed by charter issuers and school boards, and will be a component of the self-review (schools will determine how to improve test scores). However, there will be no high-stakes standardized testing. Students will not need to pass a test to graduate or be promoted, nor will test scores affect school funding. Test scores will serve as one of many tools for evaluators, including parents and communities, to compare schools in their districts.

### **Conclusion**

Charter schools are a major component of the American public education system. Schools like Cesar Chavez are reforming educational philosophies in school districts across the country. Charter schools are here to stay. Still, there is a dire need for information that will validate the charter school movement, and a consistent process to interpret that information.

The three proposals discussed in this paper are cogent ideas for charter school evaluation. However, each proposal has its flaws. Transparency allows communities to receive much-needed information and evaluate schools according to community need and parent satisfaction. Public schools must also be transparent because if transparency is applied only to charter

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<sup>22</sup> This does not include, of course, the SAT, class final exams, or other such tests, which are not administered or required by the school district.

schools, parents will not have the information to compare all schools in their communities. National standardized testing allows schools to be measured on a broad, unwavering scale, but that inflexibility is the main flaw of the "No Child Left Behind" plan. The DC Public Charter School Board's system of periodic evaluation and self-review is valuable, but allows failing schools to affect students for five years before they are shut down.

A combination of the three proposed methods allows schools to benefit from the strengths of the three ideas, while minimizing the negative consequences of each. With an all-inclusive process of transparency, testing, self-review, and school board or charter issuer review, charter and public schools are assessed based on a spectrum of standards. Since these processes would be implemented in all schools, not only charter schools, communities will have accurate information by which they can compare public and charter schools and judge their performance. Failing schools would be more easily identifiable because their flaws would be apparent in multiple aspects of evaluation. Good schools would also be more easily identifiable, and would lead the other schools in the community by providing positive examples.

With a comprehensive evaluation and accountability system good schools are no longer in danger of closure based solely on test scores, or attendance rates, or a bad reputation. With a heterogeneous evaluation system in place, charter schools-- including Cesar Chavez-- would not be the only schools that are continually scrutinized. With traditional schools included in accountability and evaluation processes, charter schools are not the only schools subject to misjudgment and unwarranted closure. Schools like Chavez that work hard to educate students well would not be at the mercy of high-stakes accountability. Conversely, any schools providing sub-standard education will have to meet demands in accountability plans, and would face closure or reconstitution.

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