



LITTLE HOOVER COMMISSION

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Commission Calls on State to Improve Authorization and Oversight of California Charter Schools

The Little Hoover Commission on Thursday urged the Governor and the Legislature to take important corrective steps to improve the charter school authorization process and promote the use of performance contracts to help ensure that all California students receive a high-quality education.

When first enacted in 1992, California's charter school law was designed to give teachers and school administrators flexibility from the state's bureaucratic education code by encouraging innovations in education in exchange for increased accountability. Lessons learned from charter schools were intended to be shared throughout the entire public school system, to benefit all students. Although charter schools have flourished in California, and some are among the highest-performing schools in the state, successful models and teaching innovations have yet to filter to traditional public schools. The Commission found over the course of this study, that in many school districts, charter schools are outsiders to the public school system, rather than a tool for the district to incubate new educational strategies.

"California charter schools in some of the state's most troubled neighborhoods have proven all students can learn, when expectations are high, teachers are supported and have freedom to innovate and parents are invited to be involved in the school," Little Hoover Commission Chairman Daniel Hancock said. "California must eliminate the artificial barriers that prevent successful schools from being replicated and encourage the knowledge transfer between schools so all California students have the opportunity to succeed."

In this study, the Commission found that the state's dysfunctional charter authorizing process limits accessibility to high quality charter schools and recommended the state expand its options for charter school authorization. At the same time, the state must do more to ensure consistently poor-performing charter schools either improve or close their doors.

Ideally, valid and viable charter school petitions are authorized by local school districts that also oversee the charter schools to monitor their success. This is the case in some school districts, but unfortunately is not the case statewide. A growing number of charter school petitioners who are denied by local school districts use the state's appellate process to seek authorization from county offices of education or, ultimately, the State Board of Education. The Commission found that the State Board of Education has become the second largest charter school authorizer, and as a result, charter school authorization and oversight

issues are consuming a disproportionate amount of the State Board's agenda.

In its report, *Smarter Choices, Better Education: Improving California Charter Schools*, the Commission recommends the state establish the California Board of Charter Schools to provide an additional avenue for charter school petitioners seeking authorization and provide oversight for schools authorized at the state level. This new board would both free up the State Board of Education to focus on broader state education policy issues and create a charter school knowledge center within state government. This new board also should be tasked with strengthening charter school accountability by promoting the use of performance contracts in the authorization process. Specifically, the Commission recommends that the state:

Establish the California Board of Charter Schools. The Board of Charter schools should serve as an independent entity within the Department of Education, responsible for authorizing charter petitions, overseeing charter schools authorized at the state level and providing technical assistance and sharing best practices on charter school authorization with school districts and county offices of education. Board members should be appointed by the Governor and Legislature for their knowledge and experience in education.

Authorize the State Board of Education to oversee charter school authorizers. To improve accountability and oversight capacity of charter school authorizers, the State Board of Education should be given the authority to oversee charter school authorizers. School districts should have the ability to opt out of the role of charter school authorization. The State Board should have the ability to grant exclusive chartering authority to certain qualified local school districts and to revoke local district charter authorizing and oversight responsibility when districts fail to authorize or renew charter schools that meet state criteria, or fail to close schools that perform below required criteria.

Develop a model performance contract for authorizers and charter schools by 2012. The new California Board of Charter Schools should develop a model performance contract that describes the rights and responsibilities of charter school operators and authorizers to hold both parties accountable and to define and enforce each party's rights. Once a model contract is developed, the state should require performance contracts between charter school authorizers and charter schools.

Improve charter school renewal criteria by 2012. To improve and clarify renewal criteria, the California Board of Charter Schools should work with stakeholders to develop recommendations for policy-makers to strengthen charter school renewal criteria.

Change the time limits granted for charter petitions. To ensure new charter schools are granted enough time to incubate, the state should require new charter schools to be authorized for a minimum of five years. To reward high-performing charter schools and eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy, the state should allow consistently successful charter schools to be renewed for up to 10 years.

The Little Hoover Commission is a bipartisan and independent state agency charged with recommending ways to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of state programs. The Commission's recommendations are sent to the Governor and the Legislature. To obtain a copy of the report, *Smarter Choices, Better Education: Improving California Charter Schools*, contact the Commission or visit its Web site: www.lhc.ca.gov.