

Testimony for Dr. Chuck Weis
Superintendent, Santa Clara County Office of Education
Little Hoover Commission
November 19, 2009

Chair and Members:

I am Chuck Weis, Superintendent of the Santa Clara County Office of Education and President of the Association of California School Administrators, ACSA. I am also a member of the state's Public School Accountability Advisory Committee.

I have been presented with a list of questions that your Commission would like to hear a response to. Before I answer your questions, I would like to share with you my views of charter schools and the movement within Santa Clara County.

Parents today are not interested in having their children attend a school simply because it is their neighborhood school. This "Y" Generation, which is very strong in Santa Clara County, is interested in putting their children into the school of their choice, regardless of district or county boundaries. This is a difficult concept for many in the traditional education model to understand and oftentimes difficult to implement due to the way schools are funded. Charter schools can fit into this model

The first question you have posed is: **How do charter schools interact with traditional schools to share knowledge and improve outcomes for all youth in the county?** When the charter movement began, it was with the understanding that new and innovative ideas on teaching and student success would flourish. Instead, there are many charter schools that simply replicate much of what the traditional school system has been doing. While the relationship between charter schools and traditional districts vary by school and district, it is typical that the two segments are not encouraged to share ideas and work together to provide additional educational opportunities for all students. The primary reason for the lack of collaboration between a traditional district and a charter school is the competition implicit in the nature of charters, poisons the relationship. In many cases, districts take the initiation of a new charter as a personal refute. Also, a district views the charter school as skimming the best students and as long as school revenue is generated by ADA, a charter school always has a fiscal impact on the district.

I have wonderful examples where the district and the charter school collaborate to offer classes to each others students and best practices for interventions. I also know that if a charter school has been approved on an appeal and then locates in a district that once denied them, this can create problems. Collaboration should be encouraged to remove some of these barriers. That is why ACSA is taking it upon itself to identify charter leaders throughout our designated regions and to provide this information to our members. We are encouraging our members to include charter school leaders in ACSA regional events so that communication can continue and expand. This is a movement that must start from the ground up for it to succeed.

How does your district reconcile facilities and site-related issues? I oversee the county where Bullis Charter School is located and has been involved in an ongoing facilities lawsuit. At issue is one that causes enormous concerns throughout the state, what to do when a district needs to close a school and a charter wants to open on that site. This is even further complicated by the financial situation school districts currently face. Districts need to be able to shut down a site and use the site to generate as much revenue as possible for their general fund to prevent a district from going into a negative certification. Another issue that is particularly troublesome for a district is when a charter is approved by a county office on appeal and requests facilities from the district.

I believe an appeal process to the county office since we are already charged with fiscal oversight of school districts, to review the financial situation of the district before granting the site to a charter would be a positive step.

When the charter petition is submitted, ensuring a Memorandum of Understanding on a number of issues including facilities is critical. When the charter grows and takes in more grades over time, this can alter the facilities agreement and can lead to additional problems. And one of the most difficult questions to resolve is which students take priority for the facilities – those in the charter school that attempt to move students out of their school to accommodate the charter, or the students of the traditional school district. This is never an easy question to answer.

The third question **asks how do we plan for addressing the number of appealed charters to the County Board of Education.** Prior to my arrival in Santa Clara County, The County Board of Education was known for approving every charter school that came before them on appeal, no matter why they were denied. This created a very negative environment for the school districts and charter schools. When I arrived two years ago, I made it a priority to put a process in place that clearly states what is expected for school districts and charter schools. We have put into place procedures and practices for overseeing charters that the county has approved and we are assisting our school districts in their work as charter authorizers. This process has resulted in greater accountability for determining successful charters and is providing data that will be used to establish accountability targets.

Is California's current criteria for charter revocations and renewals sufficient: If not, how could it be strengthened? I think authorization should be included in this question. Currently, the presumption of approval is on the charter school meaning that a charter must be approved unless certain petition requirements are not met and these thresholds are very high. For renewal, ACSA believes that mandatory academic accountability targets must be met or a standard that shows significant movement towards those standards has been met.

In my opinion it is much harder to revoke a charter than it is to non-renew. There must be a clear idea of the education focus of the charter and educational benefits to students. Authorizers need to clearly understand the direction of the charter and hold them accountable to meet the parameters of the petition. Charter schools must be held to the same fiscal accountability standards as traditional schools with transparency in budgeting.

Without this, fiscal mismanagement is difficult to prove and revocation even harder to achieve.

I also believe that there should be another option besides revocation if it is in the best interests of the students. What should we do if a charter school is performing well academically but has terrible fiscal mismanagement? The students, parents, employees, or chartering authorizer may want to keep the school open, but the law only authorizes for a revocation. Alternatives could include removing members of the board, executive director, hiring someone to help the school financially, or revocation.

How has the growth of charter schools affected your schools in the county and your county office from a fiscal perspective? As stated above, as long as school revenue is generated by ADA, a charter school will always have a fiscal impact on a district or county office. Complicating this scenario right now is declining enrollment which many districts are facing and of course, the fiscal plight of the state and reduction of billions of dollars in education funding.

Finally, you ask **If given the same flexibility with funding charter school enjoy, would all schools be able to improve student outcomes?** First, this question assumes all charter schools are able to improve student outcomes. There are good and bad charter schools and there are good and bad traditional schools. Certainly, giving school districts flexibility to meet the needs of our individual districts and communities is desired by everyone. School districts still will have collective bargaining contracts they must honor and court cases to comply with. With the current financial crisis that California's school districts are facing, flexibility is critical for financial survival. Flexibility should be provided to all public schools across the board, charter and traditional.