

public citizens for children + youth

Testimony to the School Reform Commission
Thursday, April 28, 2016

Presented by:
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For the last three years, PCCY has published data-based reports focused on the charter renewal and expansion applicants, delineating academic performance and barriers to enrollment. This year we are not issuing such a report because the SRC Charter Office has adopted many of our metrics, and in many cases improved upon them.

The Charter Office's reports, while not perfect, offer some sound data on which the SRC can base its decisions. While more needs to be done to include useful contextual information, boost consistency and improve the reliability of the reports, they represent a great leap forward.

That said, with respect to the applicants, their performance is alarmingly poor:

1. All of the nine applicants, including the five schools recommended for renewal, were ranked as "Needing Intervention" due to weak academic performance on the latest School Performance Reports (2014/15).
2. All applicants had less than half of their students performing at grade level in reading or math.
3. None of the applicants showed consistent year-over-year growth for the five years of operation.
4. Four out of the five applicants recommended for renewal had overall performance rankings in the bottom half of all public schools with the same grade span.
5. Of the two high schools recommended for renewal, one reported that 54% of its students had been placed on one or more out of school suspensions. The other high school reported a 20% suspension rate.



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Our first recommendation is that for any charter granted renewal, the SRC impose the following conditions:

- Each charter must provide a detailed plan for how it will improve its academic and overall SPR scores with annual targets for each of the next five years.
- Each charter must create a plan to reduce school suspensions to zero.
- Charters that are under-enrolling ELL students must provide a detailed outreach plan that can credibly attract these students, and set annual targets for increasing the enrollment of new ELL students.
- Any charter that has unlawful or burdensome application or enrollment requirements must remove them immediately.

More generally, these nine charters provide ample evidence that the work of reforming our schools has less to do with school governance than it has to do with inadequate funding that makes it impossible for any model of school to offer the most at-risk students in the Commonwealth the education they need and deserve.

The performance of these charter schools also debunks the silver bullet theory of charter expansion. Please look over the charts we provided to show where these charter schools rank among their peers and all district schools. As you can see, these charters are not so different than their district-run counterparts; all of our schools are struggling.

This data also indicts the state's naive statute which constrains your oversight of these schools. For instance, at any time the SRC can decide to close a traditional public school either for failure to perform or under-enrollment or any reason you want. But under state law you are only given the authority to act on the "life" of charter once every five years unless there is malfeasance. And even at the five year renewal mark your hands are tied in terms of your ability to weigh all of the evidence.

The fact is that this governing body has more experience than any school governing body in the Commonwealth with respect to charter oversight. That's why PCCY recommends that the SRC build an agenda for legislative reform that gives you the charter oversight powers your experience tells you are necessary to ensure the quality of education of our students. Instead of saddling our students with the impact of a bad law, let's change it.

Finally, it's likely that renewing any of these charters will cause the number of students enrolled in charters to rise over time because it's in the schools' interests to achieve larger economies of scale. As a result, our final recommendation is that with 26 public school closures under its belt, the SRC should manage its school portfolio equitably by expeditiously close failing charters as well. We stand by our position that any new charter school expansion must be "offset" by closing failing charter schools.