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Charter and Voucher Catch-Up

School choice? Vouchers? Charters and Cybers? Who can keep track of all this new buzz about schools? I don't know about you, but I feel a bit lost! Can someone please rewind and help me catch up?

You are not the only one asking this question. This is a great time to do some catching up on these important issues in education. Let's define a few of the players first. A charter school is an independent public school established and operated under a *charter*. The charter is granted from the local school board of the school district in which the charter school is located. Sometimes charter schools are referred to as a “brick and mortar” charters because they have an actual building, unlike a cyber charter.

That brings us to our next player. A cyber charter school is an independent public school established and operated under a charter from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. A cyber charter school uses technology to teach students through the Internet or other electronic means. Since cyber charters work through technology, they do not have actual school buildings like a charter.

There are 135 brick and mortar charter schools operating in Pennsylvania and 12 cyber charter schools. Currently, there are over 90,000 students in Pennsylvania enrolled in charter and cyber charter schools. Although both charters and cyber charters must be organized as public nonprofit corporations, charters are established at the local level and cybers are established at the state level. This distinction will become important to know in regards to pending legislation.

Charter and cyber charter schools obtain their funding from the local school districts where the student who is attending the charter school lives. When a student leaves his/her local public school to attend a charter or cyber charter, the local school district pays the charter school the per pupil cost of the home district. For example, if ABC district spends \$10,500 per student, then ABC district must pay the charter school \$10,500 for that student. By law, the amount paid by the local district to the charter is not based on the actual instructional costs of the charter school to educate the student. It may only cost the charter \$6,500 for that student but the local public school must pay their per student cost.

Maybe now you are saying, “But I thought a voucher paid for a charter school?” No... A voucher is a taxpayer-funded subsidy that a parent may use to pay to send their child to the public, private or parochial school of their choice. It is something like a gift certificate. The money leaves the public school and goes to the “choice” school. There is another one of those buzz words. A choice school is a private or parochial school a parent chooses to send their child to. A

choice school can also be a public school outside of the regular attendance area that a parent chooses for their child to attend. In most cases only low income families are eligible for vouchers.

To recap, any student can choose to enroll in a charter or cyber charter and funding will follow from the home district. Vouchers make it possible for low income students to attend the public, private or parochial school of their choice.

So now that we have covered the basics, let's go over the part that is raising some questions. The biggest issue is that charters, cybers and private schools have different rules and regulations than public schools do. Yet, taxpayer dollars are being used to fund these different types of schools. Some people are asking, "Shouldn't charters and schools that receive vouchers have the same oversight and accountability standards that public schools have?"

Additionally, often there is a lower cost-per-student at charters or voucher schools and this fact is aggressively marketed. We are not, however, comparing apples and oranges when we compare a traditional public school to a charter or a private school. The rules and regulations that govern public schools dramatically increase the costs.

O.K., so maybe you have heard some school officials talk about these "rules and regulations" before but you just aren't really getting how a few rules could make such a difference between the schools. It wasn't specific and you just aren't buying it. Let's take a couple of minutes go over it now then.

Traditional public schools are required to do all of the following. Charter and cyber charter schools, however, have:

- no annual audit of accounts
- no public school governance meetings
- no public hearing or public referendum prior to engaging in construction or agreeing to a lease
- no approval of building plans by the Department of Education
- no State Board of Education regulations for existing buildings
- no advertising/bidding requirements for the purchase of supplies
- no required integrated pest management program.

Without public meetings, audits, and review of purchases it seems there can be no doubt that taxpayers lose the ability to track expenses. Charters and cybers may choose to provide this information to the community but they are not required to.

Private and parochial schools that parents may choose for their child to attend with a voucher also have significant differences from a traditional public school that raise questions about accountability.

- Private schools are not required to test their students and their students do not have to make adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind legislation. (In other words, children do not have to take the PSSA's and therefore the schools can never be labeled "Failing.")
- Under NCLB and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) public school teachers must be highly qualified to teach their subjects. Nonpublic, non-licensed private schools may hire teachers who are not certified and are not highly qualified to teach.
- Private schools are not required to be state licensed.

- Private schools are not required to teach as broad a curriculum as public schools. For example, a private school must certify that it teaches English to include spelling, reading, writing, language literature, speech and composition. Public schools must teach language arts, integrating reading, writing, phonics, spelling, listening, speaking, literature, grammar and information management, including library skills.
- Pennsylvania's Sunshine Act and Right-to-Know Law requires that public school performance on assessments and corrective action is all public. Private schools do not have to tell anyone anything about how their students perform. Their meetings, records and test results are private.

Briefly then, private schools are not required to test students, hire certified teachers or teach the same curriculum. And, while public schools have to accept all students, private schools don't have to accept anyone they don't wish to – with or without a voucher. Again, as with charter schools, these differences raise questions about how private schools can be funded with taxpayer dollars without the same accountability and regulations of the public schools.

In summary, everyone can agree that we want the best possible educational system for our students. The Pennsylvania legislature is currently debating several bills on charter schools and vouchers as a means to improve our educational system. We hope this information on the basics of charter schools and vouchers helps you to make a decision about whether this is the correct path for our schools in Pennsylvania.

**This article is the first in a planned series of three articles on school choice **

Pass the Buck

Dealing with the media can be tough for school PR professionals, especially if your administration or board prefers a tight-lipped approach. It occurred to me recently that there may be some general education topics that are statewide in nature that I could handle for our members. The recent article on the school public relations profession is a great example. I had to laugh when the reporter for this story told me during the interview, "I don't understand why none of the school PR folks wanted to talk about their jobs getting cut."

CLEARLY, no professional would want to talk about that! In my position outside of an actual school district, however, I could discuss this issue and others freely without concern that someone in my district would rather I say nothing. If you find yourself in such a position, please feel free to refer the reporter to me. Pass the buck! This way you can protect your relationship with the reporter by providing them information – me - and protect your relationships within your district. Just remember that it must be a general, statewide education issue and not something that is specific to your district. If you have time to give me a heads up that you have referred a reporter, that would be appreciated.

Eastern Region Workshop November 10th

The Eastern region will meet on Thursday, November 10th at the School District of Cheltenham Township Administration Building from 9 am to 12 pm. The schedule is as follows: Networking and breakfast from 9 to 9:30. Beginning at 9:30, the first session will be a Communications "Show and Tell," or shared experiences for collegial growth. As such, we ask that you come ready to "show and tell" one or two highly effective communication strategies that you have

either launched or evolved over the past few years. (ie; website, newsletter, calendar, television programming, advertising campaign...) Share those projects which you may have discontinued (calendars, etc.) and whether you have replaced them with alternative communications. There is a SmartBoard and projector available for your use. If you are willing to share, please email Kristen Rawlings, krawlings@mciu.org or Susan O'Grady at sogrady@cheltenham.org to let us know what your topic is. We will create a list of presenters and send out an updated agenda later in October.

The second session is "Alternative Revenue: Communicating the Needs of Your District," led by School District of Cheltenham Township Director of Communications and Development Susan O'Grady. She will discuss her District's recent revival of their Alternative Revenue Committee. Susan will address the perks and challenges of alternative revenue campaigns and touch upon the role that she is currently playing in advancing the SDCT's Alternative Revenue Committee's mission. Finally, Susan will share local alternative revenue trends and open up the floor for a larger discussion of the possible strategies that we as communication officers can utilize to support fiscal vitality within our districts.

Please RSVP to Susan O'Grady at sogrady@cheltenham.org by 10/27/11. The address for the workshop is 2000 Ashbourne Road Elkins Park, PA 19027.

The PenSPRA Library

Did you know that PenSPRA has a library of books about communications and public relations? Members can "check out" these books at no cost. Here is a list of the books currently available. If you see one you would like, contact our librarian Jason at davidekj@southbutler.net.

Pennsbury School District is receiving a good deal of attention for their new advertising strategy. Both of these articles cover this issue.

http://articles.philly.com/2011-10-16/news/30286428_1_pennsbury-ads-middle-and-high-school

<http://consumerist.com/2011/10/schools-slap-ads-on-every-possible-surface-to-cover-budget-shortfalls.html>

Educators in eastern PA discuss their concerns about charters:

<https://primus.nss.udel.edu/admissionsportal/portal.action>

This is powerful; An excellent piece on the issues surrounding vouchers. Wouldn't it be a great speech?

<http://www.psba.org/issues-advocacy/issues-research/vouchers/08312011/really.asp>

As we have covered in previous issues of E-Comm, recent poll results show that a majority of Pennsylvanians do not want their tax dollars going to vouchers. These slides, particularly page 6 and 7, chart the poll results.

http://www.psba.org/issues-advocacy/issues-research/vouchers/09052011/all_charts-Sept_2011.pdf

An amusing editorial about vouchers.

<http://cranberry.patch.com/articles/is-gov-corbett-education-s-caped-crusader-8fbded8a>

Recent article on plans for the NCLB law

http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/U/US_EDUCATION_POLITICS?SITE=PAPIT&SECTION=NATIONAL&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT

This blog has a fairly comprehensive list of studies that demonstrate that charter schools are not proven to increase student achievement. The list maybe helpful to you at some point, although I believe the article is too biased for common use.

<http://keystonestateeducationcoalition.blogspot.com/2011/10/note-to-departing-ackerman-dont-let.html>