

Eastern Shore Superintendents

Position Paper #4: **Charter Schools**

Present legislation permits charter schools in Maryland. The Eastern Shore superintendents question the efficacy of charter schools as an alternative means within the existing public school system for additional innovative learning opportunities and creative educational approaches for students. National research on the success of charter schools as alternative educational models is inconclusive. The impact of charter schools on student achievement varies greatly, depending on who is doing the study and the demographics of the student population being served. The most objective comparative studies of charter schools' success seem to indicate that charter schools are doing at least as good a job as traditional schools and in some cases have slightly better success rates. We are unaware of any objective research that concludes that charter schools as a classification are doing a significantly better job of educating students.

The Eastern Shore superintendents believe that the chartering authority for charter schools must reside at the local level with the boards of education of each county and not with other agencies or organizations such as colleges and/or universities. Since charter schools will be considered in the school system's report card for each county, superintendents and local school boards must maintain the authority over these schools, including the assignment and transfer of staff and the monitoring and evaluating of the schools. Boards of Education must take care to review applications for charter schools to ensure that sound organizational and administrative structures and processes are in place and that program designs are geared toward helping all students meet state standards. While charter schools have additional flexibility and autonomy, these schools are and should be held to the same levels of accountability as other public schools.

Charter schools must be carefully monitored with respect to fiscal accountability. Unless the school managers have solid experience and/or training in school and financial management, there is the potential for school operational failure with grave consequences for students. Charter schools are required to submit to annual financial audits and to report those audit results to the local board of education. The public charter schools must make available all financial records and other materials needed by the boards.

It is important to provide potential operators of charter schools with the assistance and information they need to complete applications and operate a school. However the requirements for providing technical assistance, reviewing applications, processing personnel, monitoring, evaluating, auditing, responding to concerns and managing are costly to school systems. Additionally, charter schools funding models must acknowledge that in many cases the economies of scale available in tradition schools will be absent. Charter schools cost local boards additional money simply because they are an additional facility in the county's inventory that must be staffed and maintained. These costs will seldom be offset

by the reduction in student enrollment in other county schools. Additional State funding must be made available to local systems to assist with the added financial burden of complying with the charter school legislation. The State Department of Education should use the new positions granted MSDE to provide technical assistance to charter applicants to assure that the applications are complete and substantively meet local application requirements.