

To: Members of the NYS Education Reform Commission
From: Susan Crawford, Distr-3 parent, Director, The Right to Read Project
Date: October 13, 2012
Subject: Public Testimony on Charter School Authorizations

I am here today to recommend you review the Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants' requirement that recipients must expand "high quality charter schools." In particular, I suggest that expansion of charter schools in New York City and New York State await review of the following concerns:

1. A number of charter school networks have high rates of purposeful student attrition (described below) between their incoming grades and their final grades. This practice is also called "backfill," in which some schools replace "counseled out" or otherwise departing students, and others don't. In schools where lower-performing students are "counseled out" and not replaced, the practice both inflates test scores for these chains, and puts even more pressure on class-sizes and scarce resources in surrounding schools that must take in the rejected students;
2. The original charter school legislation in New York State was passed on the understanding that charter schools would serve as "incubators of innovation," and that they would share whatever "best practices" they developed with the larger public school community. So far, 14 years after that legislation was passed, neither of these is being done.
3. The New York City Department of Education appears to be allowing a handful of charter chains to proliferate, without any guarantee that each new school in these chains will succeed, and at the expense of letting other types of charter schools and district schools emerge or grow.
4. The proliferation of the KIPP, Success and Democracy Prep chains in particular appears to be driven by Race to the Top Funding and School Improvement Grant funding that *obliges* states awarded that funding that they open "high performing charter schools." This term is now being applied to these chains, when in fact it can't be

known if any one school, whether it is opened by a chain operator, an individual charter operator, or a district, will be "high performing" until several years into its existence. Thus, there should be no rush to open any school of any type without fully accounting for the need for it and the likelihood that it will properly serve its community.

In view of the above concerns, it does not seem fair or reasonable to allow any charter school "chain operator" to open successive schools based merely on the reputation of a pilot school.

Expanding on the above concerns, I wish to add these details:

On Attrition: In KIPP and Success Academy schools, --

Students who leave are not replaced;

Students are removed either by being "counseled out," or with threats of being held back. In the latter case, for instance, a fifth grade KIPP student who *has passed NYS tests* might be told, "Yes, you passed, but your work is not up to our standards. If you stay here you'll have to repeat fifth grade, if you go back to a regular public school you can go on to sixth grade."

In addition, in school year 2011-2012, The Upper West Side Success School in the Brandeis complex, which is currently depriving high school students of desperately needed space, was *undersubscribed*. This is the case even though the Success Network offers seats there to students from lotteries to its *other* schools. In view of this, it must be concluded that the Success Chain has reached "market saturation;" Further, despite being undersubscribed, Gale Brewer's office had received reports of five students already being "counseled out" of Upper Westside Success by March, 2012.

In a recent SUNY CSI meeting, one of the board members described incidents of student attrition as "anecdotal." The District 3 CEC has been following and documenting this practice over the past few years. While parents of students who were removed do not usually want to speak

publicly, the D-3 CEC can supply you with numbers, and/or arrange for you to meet privately with parents.

On "Innovation" –

The chief "innovation" of charter schools that is cited over and over in the press is that they have longer school days and longer school years. While these schedules appear to be borrowed from practices in Asian countries, it is hard to see what is "innovative" about them in terms of academics. In fact, many Asian countries rely heavily on attrition by ability as students proceed up through the grades, just as it appears the KIPP and Success Academy chains do.

In a more specific example, Eric Grannis (husband of Success chain operator Eva Moskowitz), is advertising to parents that his "Tapestry Project" chain of charter schools will use the "Everyday Math" program. Everyday Math is used throughout the NYC DOE system, so how is this "innovative?" Moreover, most parent advocates and math experts see Everyday Math as a drag on student math performance, not an asset to it. (See the AmericanMathForum listserve.)

On Sharing "Best Practices"–

We have yet to see any coordinated effort to share whatever innovative classroom practices charter schools have found to improve student achievement. By now, over a decade into the charter school movement, it raises concerns that there are none to share. This would further foster the concern that many of the charter chains rely on attrition to boost their scores.

In some of the early Success Academy literature, the chain's literacy program was described as "proprietary." When I raised this concern at several different public forums, the word disappeared. Nevertheless, when Eva Moskowitz was asked at a Hunter College forum whether she would share what she is doing to achieve "test scores that match Scarsdale's," as she describes them, she said that it is "not her job" to help the public schools.

There is a single case that I have come across of a charter school sharing best practices with nearby public schools. It is in Rhode Island, and I will send you the references to it to you separately. It is a case that intersects very well with the literacy advocacy work that I do through The Right to Read Project. In that respect it also represents the polar opposite of the concerns I have raised here today.

Indeed, the practices I've described, and the lack of interest from the charter school community in sharing "best practices," furthers the concern that parents have that the charter school movement is more about privatizing our public education system than it is about improving it. To underscore our concern, I am including a recent Washington Post article by Valerie Strauss called "The Big Business of Charter Schools."

Thank you for providing this time for public comment on the charter approval process.

Again, based on the foregoing testimony, I suggest that you seek no more charter schools in New York City and New York State unless and until they can show, in the schools they already have, that they are capable of educating full cohorts of students for the full grade-span that they serve.

I also suggest that the state refrain from approving any new charter schools to any operator based on anything more than the merits of one particular charter school applicant at a time, whether it addresses the needs of the particular neighborhood into which it would go, and whether it can procure it's own space without taking away space from existing schools. Then, I ask that the state track the progress of each of the schools closely, so that we will all know what works in them, what doesn't work in them, and why.

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