

STATE OF COLORADO

OFFICE OF THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR
130 State Capitol
Denver, Colorado 80203-1792
Phone: (303) 866-2087



Barbara O'Brien
Lt. Governor

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Submitted by
Barbara O'Brien, Lt. Governor of Colorado

Thank you Chairman Miller, Committee members and Congressman Polis for this opportunity to talk about charter schools.

I was the president of the Colorado Children's Campaign, a statewide child advocacy organization from 1990 to 2006 when I ran for Lt. Governor. Our mission was to advocate for better health, safety and education for all Colorado kids, but particularly for children most at risk. In the early 1990s there was little hard data on vulnerable children in the public school system, but all you had to do was walk into a fourth grade class in a poor neighborhood and see the faces of the kids who had already mentally checked out to know that those eager young faces had stopped learning in school and that a lot of teens would be dropping out.

In 1991, I began searching for ways to change the trajectory to success for vulnerable students. Charter schools offered a way to stimulate innovation *within* public education by giving educators greater autonomy in exchange for greater accountability. After two years of research and coalition building, the Children's Campaign successfully advocated for the passage of the Colorado Charter School Act of 1993, which the Colorado Legislature passed and Governor Roy Romer signed into law, making us the third state in the nation to enact such a law. This was still unchartered territory, but inaction was no longer an option in the face of educational failure.

This failure became even clearer when the No Child Left Behind Act produced additional data confirming that low income, minority and rural students were indeed being left far behind. Reformers began to use the autonomy of charter schools to schedule more time in school, form different educational missions from college prep to vocational education, use different instructional methods, and encourage increased engagement with parents. In Colorado, for example, 97 percent of charters use models that are different from traditional schools, including Montessori, experiential learning, and technology-based curricula, among others.

Charter schools create opportunities and open doors for kids who would otherwise be left behind. They do it by using the best of the American spirit -- entrepreneurship, innovation, and hard work. They are an asset, not a threat, to our public education system.

Some districts initially viewed their own public charter schools as competition, but most districts now celebrate the educational diversity they bring. For example, Denver Public Schools

is actively seeking out more high-performance charter schools to help it meet the learning needs of their students. We have also created a state chartering authority in Colorado, The Colorado Charter School Institute, so districts that do not have the capacity to serve as quality authorizers can delegate that function to the institute.

Charter schools are incubators of innovation that is replicated and diffused throughout our public school system. I view charter schools as education laboratories – taking risks, trying new things, developing alternatives, and pushing the reform envelope. Districts are learning every day from successful models and can deploy their knowledge in other schools.

Since 1993, our state’s charter schools have experienced both success and failure, just like any new venture, but their entrepreneurial risk-taking has clearly led to great rewards system-wide. In Colorado, 78 percent of charters made Adequate Yearly Progress last year, compared to 58 percent of traditional public schools, and 55 percent of charters were rated excellent or higher compared to 43 percent of traditional public schools. Charter schools have come a long way since 1993 and now serve seven percent of the student population – more than double the national average. I would like to briefly highlight a few examples:

- West Denver Preparatory Charter School: With nearly 90 percent of its students eligible for the federal Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) Program, the school boasts higher proficiency rates than the district and the state, and stands out among nearby middle schools, according to a June 2009 Colorado Department of Education (CDE) report. On the new Colorado Growth Model, its students scored the highest average growth percentile of any school in Denver Public Schools in both the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years. Entering students are often several grades behind. To help them catch up and prepare for college students attend longer school days, receive extended class time, complete homework assignments daily, have access to tutoring, and are held to high standards. As Founder and Head of School Chris Gibbons points out, West Denver Prep is “all about college all of the time.”
- The Pinnacle Charter School in Federal Heights is another example of public charter school success beating the odds. The school uses the core-knowledge model in grades K-8 and the high school curriculum has a college preparatory focus. Advanced placement and dual credit classes are also available. More than half of its students are minorities. A recent CDE report commended the school for both its overall academic achievement and its significant yearly growth, calling it a “high growth school.”
- And, there is the Denver School of Science and Technology, one of the highest-performing public schools in the state with 60 percent minority students that has exceeded the state median growth rate substantially for every subject for every subgroup of students for the past three years.
- Finally, the Roosevelt Edison Public Charter School with 85 percent of its students eligible for FRL and 75 percent minority students, was labeled a “beating the odds” school by CDE – meaning that at least half of the school’s students are eligible for FRL and the school received a performance rating of “excellent” or demonstrated “high growth” in achievement scores.

So what makes these schools effective in educating at-risk students when others have failed? After more than 15 years since we passed the law, I believe that we now have enough

evidence to know what works and why. Here are a few characteristics that I have identified in successful charter schools:

- They welcome accountability.
- They have found ways to have more hours per school day and more days per school year so that their students can catch up – with the support of their teachers and parents.
- They welcome data.
- They foster a culture of achievement.
- They have demonstrated the importance of the leadership of a good principal.
- They welcome high performance standards.
- They attract principals and teachers who want the challenge of overcoming great odds to boost their students' achievement.
- They innovate with every component of a school from curriculum to assessment to schedule.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that not all charter schools work out, and districts have had to intervene and even close unsuccessful charter schools in Colorado. This is an important part of our charter school law that provides districts with the tools and the authority they need to intervene if a charter school is not working out. That is why it is imperative for authorizers to have policies and processes in place to swiftly close failing charters. Accountability is a cornerstone of the charter school approach and quality control is of the utmost importance to and welcomed by the charter school community.

But the successes far outweigh the failures, as evidenced by the growing charter school enrollment and waiting lists in Colorado. In the 2007-2008 school year, 56,000 students were enrolled in more than 140 schools, while another 38,000 students were on waiting lists.

While I've been addressing the issue of charters and at-risk students, large concentrations of which are found in major urban centers, federal policy makers should also consider and support the role of charters in boosting the achievement of suburban students with a lower risk profile, yet similar needs for improved educational outcomes. We as a country should not be complacent about our best schools as other developed countries accelerate the academic achievements of their students.

Congress and the Obama Administration need to lead the country in putting a laser focus on student achievement. Today there are many models of successful charters – from the national KIPP network to the unique West Denver Prep – and it is time for federal education policy to include incentives for replicating successful charters and disincentives for allowing unsuccessful charters to continue. We must invest in the expansion and replication of what works and close down what has failed. Without access to resources, schools with a proven track record of raising achievement and closing the achievement gap are unable to serve more students.

However, there is one caveat...

Charter schools are the research and development arm of education. While our focus should be on replicating successful models, we should always leave room for further innovation.

We owe it to students to give them the best we have.

Thank you.