

The Detroit News

How we keep charter schools up to par

March 20, 2016 | Cindy Schumacher, *detroitnews.com*



Never before have parents been given more influence and flexibility to determine which education options are best suitable for their children. Before the advent of charter schools, a student's ZIP code was the primary factor governing where they would attend school.

But now, parents have the right to choose. The demand for charter schools is at an all-time high, with nearly three million students enrolled in charter schools around the country and all but eight states with charter school laws on the books.

Each state has different laws governing charter authorizers, the entities permitted to legally issue charter contracts. Authorizers set clear performance standards and are responsible for "overseeing compliance by the board of directors with the contract and all applicable law."

Michigan's approach has resulted in more options for parents, evidenced by the now 303 charter schools in the state educating almost 10 percent of all students. The Governor John Engler Center for Charter Schools at Central Michigan University became the nation's first university authorizer more than 20 years ago and we currently authorize 62 of the state's charter schools which serve more than 30,000 Michigan students. In the city of Detroit, nearly 6,000 students attend nine charter public schools that we authorized.

Providing choice is only valuable if it represents quality choices, something that not all authorizers have been able to adequately provide. Authorizers are the key to holding schools to high standards, by both nurturing those who deliver on their expectations and closing schools that cannot offer the quality education that students deserve.

As authorizers, we must hold ourselves accountable not only to the law, but also to families and students.

While many of the state's authorizers have already adopted and implemented nationally recognized standards and best practices, the Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers sought to create a mechanism that ensures all authorizers are doing more than simply meeting their statutory responsibilities. The end result of the council's work is an authorizer accreditation system developed in conjunction with AdvancED, one of the world's leading accreditation organizations.

The authorizer accreditation system is an intensive program consisting of an internal self-assessment and multi-day external review where authorizers are evaluated according to current law and accepted standards. The process is designed to be rigorous to ensure that authorizers are assessed based on a complete review of all aspects of charter authorizing. The criteria by which authorizers will be evaluated include intervention in low performing schools, such as closure, ensuring quality options by prohibiting authorizer shopping, establishing a comprehensive process to ensure no conflicts of interest exist on charter public school boards, and ensuring greater transparency in operations and academics for charter public schools.

As the charter school movement continues to grow, accountability for schools and authorizers must remain a central focus. Michigan is pioneering charter authorizer accountability through accreditation. We encourage other states to follow suit and establish an accreditation system as the standard for successful charter school authorizing.

Accreditation ultimately leads to what matters most — better educational outcomes for students.

Cindy Schumacher is the executive director of the Governor John Engler Center for Charter Schools at Central Michigan University.