



A Letter from ASBCS

Brought to you by the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools

Issue #6

Thursday, September 28, 2017

Board President Response to GCI Report

Op-Ed

I'm President of the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools. I'm also a proud mom. Between my two children – one of whom attends a charter school and, the other, a district school – I've seen up-close the best of Arizona's public school system.

So, I was disappointed to read that a loosely organized "institute" of former elected officials and politicians released a report – not on how to help all schools improve – but, rather, singling out charter schools for unfounded criticism. The report is riddled with errors and inconsistencies, and drips with sarcasm. Suffice to say, it reads more like a campaign hit-piece than a scholarly analysis. .

Charter schools are well-regulated

As the leader of the organization charged with overseeing the vast number of charter schools in Arizona, please allow me to set the record straight:

- Charter schools are subject to independent, annual audits that must be submitted to the charter authorizer (the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools, in most cases);
- Charter schools must report all financial transactions in accordance with guidelines established by the Arizona Auditor General and Arizona Department of Education;
- In nearly every instance, so-called "related party" transactions must be fully disclosed and authorized by the charter school's governing board.

These boards are subject to state Open Meeting Law requirements – meaning these decisions occur in full view of the public.

The transparency of charter-school financial transactions is what enabled the institute to find, view and critique them in the first place. Perhaps irony is dead.

Stiff penalties for non-compliance

If there are charter schools breaking the law, the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools is committed to uncovering that abuse. In many ways, charter schools face more dire consequences for financial non-compliance than district schools. For example: a charter school can be penalized 10 percent of its State funding. Or its charter may be revoked altogether, meaning the school must close its doors.

Over the last decade, the Auditor General's Office made findings against 17 Arizona school districts for theft and misuse of public dollars. In the last year alone, more than 15 districts either failed to submit financial audits or were found out of compliance.

When was the last time a district school faced closure for this reason?

These instances are not pointed out to shame school districts. Rather, it is to demonstrate financial mismanagement on the part of a small number of operators is not unique to either the district or charter system.

Think-tank reports and screaming newspaper headlines that claim widespread abuse are simply misleading.

There's good news in Arizona education. Really!

Unfortunately, the institute's misleading report and media coverage that followed have distracted from real efforts to improve K-12 education in Arizona. Likewise, it is counterproductive when ideologues and politicians seek political gain by pitting charter and district schools against each other.

The truth is, our education system is made stronger when Arizona parents have a full menu of school options to select among. Consider this:

AzMERIT scores are up across almost every grade level among Arizona district and charter schools. Considered as a group, Arizona's 185,000 charter-school students have test scores competitive with the top-performing states in the country.

From a regulatory standpoint, the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools is focused on making sure our schools meet their obligations to students and families. Failing charter schools don't last long.

A new state law, approved earlier this year, will bring a new level of financial transparency to districts and multi-site charter schools. Once implemented, this will enable parents to see more clearly how individual schools are allocating taxpayer dollars for teacher pay, student services, administrative functions and other needs.

On behalf of the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools, we are committed to continuing what we do on a daily basis - holding charter schools accountable, creating educational opportunity for students and taking action against those schools not making the grade.

We welcome thoughtful, well-intentioned suggestions to improve our accountability measures, and we look forward to being an active participant in the mission we all share: to ensure every Arizona student has access to a quality education.

Your Board President,

Kathy Senseman