

**STATEMENT BY SENN BROWN, EXECUTIVE
SECRETARY, WISCONSIN CHARTER SCHOOLS
ASSOCIATION (WCSA), TO THE WISCONSIN
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL'S SPECIAL
COMMITTEE ON CHARTER SCHOOLS
(SEPTEMBER 26, 2006 at the STATE CAPITOL, MADISON)**

INTRO

Thank you for inviting me and Todd Ziebarth, Senior Policy Analyst, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, to present information to the committee and respond to your questions. The WCSA (www.wicharterschools.org) is a statewide voluntary membership association of public charter schools and individual charter friends. The Alliance (www.publiccharters.org) is a national organization that supports high-quality public charter schools and helps state associations like the WCSA to nurture charter school growth and student achievement.

A statement of the WCSA's vision, mission and principles is attached. While I believe that my comments and suggestions here are compatible with the WCSA's vision, mission and principles, I should point out that I've not asked the WCSA Board of Directors to review or approve my statement; and therefore I take full responsibility for its contents.

OVERVIEW

Wisconsin's initial charter school law was first enacted by the 1993 State Legislature. It was very limited – allowing only 10 school districts to each sponsor not more than two charter schools. The chartering law and practice evolved over the following decade with all school districts now allowed to sponsor an unlimited number of charter schools. Public entities in Milwaukee and Racine, in addition to school districts, have been given the opportunity to authorize charter schools. Now, nearly 200 public charter schools are serving students throughout Wisconsin, and more than 3,600 are operating in the 40 states and DC with charter school laws.

The charter schools movement in Wisconsin is still in its embryonic stages, yet in the past decade it has already had a positive impact on new school creation, student learning, community engagement and public school improvement. Yes, we've come a long way in a relatively short period of time and many good things are happening because of Wisconsin's emerging charter schools sector. There's increased public support for charter schools and we're hearing now from many education leaders, policymakers and others that they've been long-time supporters of charter schools. But, when you probe a bit regarding their support you may find that it is conditional Yes, they support charter schools **BUT DON'T CHANGE ANYTHING**; and that has been the position of many defenders of the status quo when proposals were advanced to expand Wisconsin's charter school law. **DON'T CHANGE ANYTHING !**

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Quite frankly, we're not yet half way home in fully realizing the potential of chartering as a state strategic policy initiative and delivery system option that is intended to enhance student learning and create a self-improving public education system. You and this study committee have an opportunity to be the visionary leaders in educating the public and policymakers about why Wisconsin should create the capacity for change by expanding the charter school law, opening wide a new schools sector and providing for more choices in public education. I hope you will seize the opportunity here to be leaders in exploring uncharted waters and recommending proposals to significantly expand Wisconsin's charter schools initiative.

MODERNIZING WISCONSIN'S CHARTER SCHOOL LAW

The Legislative Council's formal charge to your study committee calls for you to develop proposed legislation for new charter schools to be created and to improve the ability of charter schools to serve pupils including issues relating to modernizing Wisconsin's charter school law.

As I reflect on my past forty years of work with the public education system in this state, I believe that chartering, as a state strategic policy initiative, has greater potential than most other systemic changes to improve the public education system. I would urge you again, as you conduct this study, to devote time together and with other invited resource people to more fully understand the underlying goals and purposes of the chartering strategy. Hopefully, your specific recommendations for modernizing Wisconsin's charter school law will be accompanied by a clear and compelling statement that describes why the chartering strategy is so important to young people, families, community and the state's future. By fully explaining the goals and reasons for your recommendations, you may better ensure that your committee's proposals to modernize the charter law will receive favorable action by a broad bi-partisan coalition of policymakers.

Let me recommend some homework before your next meeting. Please take an opportunity to read "Creating the Capacity for Change – How and Why Governors and Legislatures are Opening a New-Schools Sector in Public Education," by Ted Kolderie. You'll find it at the Education/Evolving website -- www.educationevolving.org. I hope you will devote time at your subsequent meetings to discussions about the "big-picture" WHY of chartering as a statewide strategic policy initiative.

STUDY COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Another Legislative Council study committee, the Study Committee on State School Aids, has decided to make its recommendations in two stages. As I understand, the committee will make recommendations this fall (i.e. Stage 1) on fiscal issues that are appropriate for inclusion in the state's 2007-09 biennial budget bill. Stage 2 recommendations, which may be advanced later this winter or early in the new year, will deal with "policy" issues which may more appropriately be dealt with in separate bills outside the state budget bill process. The committee's purpose is to advance its recommendations on fiscal issues this fall so the Governor, who will be elected in

November, will have the benefit of those recommendations as he makes decisions regarding the executive budget bill. That two-stage process sounds like a good idea to me. If your study committee adopts a two-stage approach for advancing recommendations on fiscal and policy issues, I'd suggest that at the committee's next meeting it consider and act on charter school proposals with a state fiscal impact that would be appropriately considered as part of the 2007-09 state budget, including the following:

- (a) Clarify and ensure that students attending all charter schools are entitled to be transported to their school similar to students attending non-charter public schools and private schools; and provide state funding to support such transportation.
- (b) Increase the per pupil payment amount and state appropriations under the statutory formula for state funding of independent charter schools sponsored by non-school district authorizers.
- (c) Re-create the law applicable to funding independent charter schools so that estimated state payments each year to independent charter schools will no longer be reduced proportionally from the general state aids paid to each school district.
- (d) Create a single-purpose statewide charter school authorizing entity that is allowed to authorize public charter schools located anywhere in the state, and to receive and act on appeals in cases of revocations, denials or non-renewals of charters.
- (e) Allow all UW-System 4-year universities, technical college district boards, CESAs, and tribal colleges in Wisconsin to authorize charter schools.
- (f) Provide financial incentives and support for school districts to develop and implement school site-based budgeting and financial accounting systems; and direct DPI to provide technical assistance to help districts implement school site-based management.

CHARTER SCHOOL POLICY ISSUES

Several policy proposals with minimal or no state fiscal impact could be advanced by the committee in Stage 2 at the conclusion of the committee's study. The policy recommendations could be introduced and considered by the 2007 Legislature in one or more legislative bills separate from the state budget. Following are several policy issues which the committee may want to consider as it works to modernize the charter school law:

- (a) Effective for school district-authorized charter schools created after July 1, 2007, require that a legal entity (i.e. incorporated organization) representing the charter school enter into the contract with the school district authorizer.

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(b) Repeal provisions in current law that limit the opportunity for all schools within a district to be charter schools.

(c) Provide that all charter school employees will be eligible to participate in the state retirement system.

(d) Provide that prior to revoking or non-renewing a contract for the operation of a charter school, the authorizer will give the charter school written notice of the reasons and an opportunity to be heard.

YOUR CASE FOR MODERNIZING THE CHARTER SCHOOL LAW

In conclusion, I would again urge your committee to develop a rationale statement which would accompany your specific recommendations. Your statement might be somewhat similar to "The Case for Creating an Open Sector" (ATTACHED). It would inform policymakers and other citizens of your committee's state strategic policy vision and the compelling reasons why your recommendations to modernize Wisconsin's charter schools initiative should be enacted into law. . Thank you.



Vision

The Wisconsin Charter Schools Association is a leader in fostering choices in public education through charter schools.

Mission

The Wisconsin Charter Schools Association promotes a culture statewide that empowers charter schools to achieve results.

Statement of Principles

We believe that ...

- Parents must have the right to choose the schools they believe are best for their children.
- Parents must have a variety of choices among schools.
- Credible charter school proposals must have the opportunity to be implemented.
- A variety of paths through which charter schools are authorized must be available.
- Charter schools must have maximum autonomy and flexibility to make decisions critical to their success (finances, mission, staffing, evaluation, curriculum and instruction, etc.)
- Charter schools must be accountable for student performance.
- The best charter school governance structures are those that place decision-making and policy development in the hands of the stakeholders who are closest to the school (e.g., parents, staff, community partners).

GUEST COLUMN

Many don't understand charter schools

By SENN BROWN

Public approval of charter schools has increased significantly, according to a recently released national Gallup Poll. The public support is translating into more educational options within public education. Nearly 200 charter schools are now operating in Wisconsin.

School boards are increasingly choosing to charter. The Appleton School Board, for example, has authorized 13 public charter schools. School boards in Madison, Monona Grove, Middleton-Cross Plains, Lodi, Deerfield, Verona, Marshall, Cambridge and many other districts are sponsors of charter schools.

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster recently awarded more than \$4 million in federal grant funds to support planning of proposed charter schools and start-up activities of new charter schools. The grants include funding for planning 35 new charter schools, expected to open next fall, in 26 school districts including The Studio School in Madison.

Although there's increasing public support, the concept of charter schools is still not clearly understood by many citizens. The 38th annual Gal-

lup Poll showed that 53 percent of adults surveyed nationally incorrectly said charter schools are not public schools. Half of the respondents thought charter schools are free to teach religion, though they are not. Sixty percent said charter schools can charge tuition, which is incorrect.

Charter schools are public, nonsectarian schools of choice. They operate pursuant to a contract (i.e. charter) with the school board or other chartering authority.

Wisconsin's charter school law was first enacted by the 1993 state Legislature. Over the next several months, a Wisconsin Legislative Council special committee, consisting of 16 legislators and citizen members, will study issues relating to modernizing the state's charter school law.

Charter schools are first and foremost about student learning and development. They are also about educational choices, school-site accountability and autonomy, and innovations in public education.



JOSEPH W. JACKSON III - State Journal archives

Students at Nuestro Mundo Community School in a Madison charter school.

Wisconsin State Journal

FORUM

Brown is executive secretary of the Wisconsin Charter Schools Association in Madison; www.wicharterschools.org.

