

LOUISIANA'S CHARTER SCHOOLS

Over the years, education reform has taken on many iterations; the most recent has been that of public school choice. Following the federal government's emphasis on school choice as school reform, the Louisiana legislature created the state's first charter schools in 1995. Today, over 10% of Louisiana's publicly funded charter schools are governed independently, rather than by an elected local school board.

The Louisiana Legislature initially instituted charter schools as laboratories for classroom and administrative innovation for at risk children by giving the schools' operators greater flexibility and freedom from regulation. Charter school law in Louisiana has served the school choice movement in significant ways. It has provided for the elimination of residential enrollment zones, limits to government regulation and oversight, and the facilitation of an exchange of private and public dollars.

The 2017 League of Women Voters of Louisiana convention called for an examination and consensus report on charter schools in Louisiana. The scope of the study has encompassed governance, finance, and accessibility and equity. Areas of concern include: the rapid growth of charter schools in Louisiana, additional costs to the state and the larger role of state government in local affairs, more complex layers of regulation and paths for oversight, the creation of competition for resources between charter schools and traditional public school systems, effects of market-based charter schools and for-profit management companies, and barriers of class and race that segregate children by where they live. It is our contention that the interests of the public, the charter schools, and their boards are best served when internal and external oversight is increased, not decreased, and effective oversight is provided by both the authorizer and the Louisiana legislature.

The League of Women Voters of Louisiana supports

1. Representative government, transparency, open government, and the Sunshine Act at each level of the governance of charter schools. This includes the charter school board's governance as a political subdivision of the state and in the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the local school board's authorization of charter schools.

- Charter school board membership should represent the geographical area of the students attending that school, regardless of type of charter school. Membership should include some representation of the various demographic groups within that school board's jurisdiction as well as at least one parent/guardian of children attending that school.
- There should be a legal process and timeline for the return of a Recovery School District charter school, or schools, to the jurisdiction of the local district school board.
- Information should be available to the public through open electronic access, via the charter school's website, to provide the following information:

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- The charter contract for the charter school between its non-profit corporation and the authorizer
 - Timely public notice that meets Open Meetings law for public bodies
 - A list of current board members and their contact information
 - Approved minutes of each board meeting sequentially for each year and past years
 - The school's most current School Performance Score
 - An explanation of the complaint and appeal process
 - Discipline policies or student/parent handbook containing them
 - Contact information for the school, including address and name of school leader
 - For a school's financial report, the League supports access to financial reports but not necessarily on the school's website.
- The Louisiana legislature should limit authorization of charter schools to two entities, the elected district school board and, as the state's public education appellate body, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE).
 - The application and approval processes by charter school authorizers should be transparent and equitable, subject to a set of published guidelines for approval and renewal of charter schools.

2. Representative government that holds to account both the boards of charter schools and their contractors through adequate government oversight and control of this public service In order to ensure taxpayer dollars are used efficiently and effectively for that service

- Funding for virtual charter schools should be reviewed and evaluated at required intervals to determine whether their funding level is appropriate.
- To protect the taxpayer's interest, the Louisiana Department of Education and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education should be required to report publicly the terms of the mortgage or lease of privately owned facilities paid for with public funds.
- Disclosure, oversight, and annual audits of the financial records of not-for-profit and for-profit charter school management organizations should be required.
- As a recipient of public education funds, charter school boards should be required to meet the same procurement requirements as all local education agencies, including competitive bids and public disclosure for:
 - Acquisition of sites
 - Construction of facilities
 - Purchasing of supplies

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- Purchasing of equipment
- Purchasing of services
- The Louisiana Department of Education should require prompt compliance by charter schools to correct any material findings issued by the Louisiana Legislative Auditor in its review of Types 2, 4 and 5 charter schools.
- All movable property, equipment, and reusable supplies purchased by a charter school with public dollars should be surrendered to the authorizer if the charter closes for any reason.

3. A quality public education that is essential for a strong, viable, and sustainable democracy and is a civil right. Government at all levels shares the responsibility for equality of opportunity for education regardless of race, color, gender, religion, national origin, age, sexual orientation or disability. The League is committed to racial integration of schools as a necessary condition for equal access to education.

- The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Louisiana Department of Education should ensure that students' civil rights are protected in every education setting, including all types of charter schools.
- The Louisiana Department of Education should at regular intervals send staff to monitor a charter school's identification and evaluation processes for student populations suspected of having disabilities.
- Transportation services for all charter schools should be consistent with those required for traditional public schools.
- Transportation waivers issued by the Louisiana Department of Education and the Board of Education should require a public process and provide the public with details outlining the reasons for the waiver.
- The determination of the location of a charter school should be a priority for the authorizer, and a negotiation to determine the location of a charter school should take place between the authorizer, the local school district or the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the charter school operator.
- Charter school authorization should be contingent upon a detailed review and impact analysis of enrollment across the school district in which a charter school applicant seeks approval.