



Why Public School Parents Oppose H.R. 2218 and Our Recommendations for Improving the Charter School Bill

A Parents Across America Position Paper on the
“Empowering Parents Through Quality Charter Schools Act”

July 5, 2011

Parents Across America (PAA), a grassroots organization representing public school parents from across the United States, **opposes the current version of H.R. 2218**, the Empowering Parents Through Quality Charter Schools Act, which was recently reported from the House Education and Workforce Committee.

PAA is committed to bringing the voice of public school parents and common sense to local, state, and national education debates. **We believe that parents are empowered, and children are better educated, only when parents are full partners and have an equal voice in education policy making.** PAA supports **proven, common-sense education reforms that have a demonstrated track record of success.**

PAA has many concerns about charter schools, their effect on our nation's system of public schools, and how well they serve children and families. PAA was hopeful that the Committee would include provisions in H.R. 2218 that would effectively address our major concerns about the lack of equity, quality, parental rights, and accountability of many charter schools. The bill makes some progress toward those goals and the Committee should be recognized for those efforts.

However, we are concerned that the overall effect of the bill will be to **rapidly increase the quantity and not the quality of charter schools**, without the necessary safeguards, **and to weaken the public school system**, which we believe is the very backbone of our democracy.

PAA looks forward to working with to improve H.R. 2218, in order to assure better charter school transparency, accountability and governance, so that they fulfill the role originally envisioned for these programs that of partners in improving the overall quality of our nation's public schools.

Our specific concerns about H. R. 2218 and our recommendations for improving it are detailed below.

PAA's Concerns about Charter Schools and our Recommendations for Improving H.R. 2218

1 - Effective Parental Involvement: VOICE along with CHOICE

We are pleased that H.R. 2218 at least tacitly acknowledges the power of parent participation in children's education, which research shows is one of the most critical elements of successful schools and improved student achievement. Unfortunately, the bill ***does not include any of the key aspects of parent involvement identified as critical by experts***, such as a parental role in decision making at the school level. Instead, the bill relegates parents to the role of consumers rather than educational partners. This does not provide parents with a real voice, only a dizzying array of unknown and unreliable options. The first choice of most parents is to send their child to a high-quality neighborhood school; it is unclear how this bill supports that choice. In fact, we have seen how the rapid expansion of the charter sector has undermined neighborhood schools, drawing resources from them and at the same time expecting them to serve our most at-risk students. Furthermore, as more states remove their charter caps, we will see more districts that are majority charter schools. When students must compete for access in a lottery, they can be left without any school to attend in their neighborhood.

In addition, we do not support the bill's proposal for centralized state chartering entities. Such charter authorizers are not elected officials accountable to parents and the community and do not have the same stake in the vitality and improvement of local public schools. This would be a huge step backwards, especially given that it is their taxpayer funds which will be used to support the operations of these schools. Taxation without representation is a principle deeply rooted in our nation's history and values. It is disturbing that this bill ignores or conflicts with that important ideal.

PAA recommends:

- **The same parent involvement requirements for all schools** receiving public funds, including charter schools. This should encompass parent involvement in school governance through PTAs, membership on an elected or advisory governance board, or other means of bringing parents into decision making roles at the school.
- Guarantees that there will be **parent and community input in the charter school authorizing process.**
- **The right of local communities to approve or disapprove the establishment of charter schools** in their communities, either through direct vote or through their school board or other locally-elected body.

2- Problematic charter school enrollment and other practices: WHOSE CHOICE?

The experience of many parents is that the charter school has the “choice” of enrolling or retaining their children, not the parent.

The data are clear that charter schools across the nation overall enroll far fewer English learners and disabled students, and are pleased that H.R. 2218 highlights that problem. However, we do not believe that the bill provides adequate remedies to prevent charter schools from employing discriminatory policies and practices, or legal consequences for such actions.

For example, there are many cases where students are refused enrollment in a charter school, expelled, or pushed or “counseled out” of a charter school. Charter schools may practice exclusionary measures; for example, “enrollment applications” that ask families to write essays or state whether a child has an special education Individual Educational Plan before even being considered. In some cases, the school's discipline policies are excessive or unduly punitive; in others, students who are not “making the grade” or who need special services are encouraged to leave. Some charter schools charge fees and penalties that are so burdensome that the parents end up breaking their “contract” with the school or simply opt to remove the child to avoid the payment. In general, data shows a disturbingly large attrition rate in many charter schools, yet these schools are not held accountable.

Advocacy groups in Chicago, New Orleans, and elsewhere have been denied basic information about charter school operations that should be disclosed under Freedom of Information laws. Charter schools should be required to publicly report on all spending, sources of funding, financial relationships between board members and charter management operators, student attrition rates including the number of students who enroll and leave each month, as well as detailed student demographic characteristics including free lunch, English learner and special education status. Without the public availability of such data, it is difficult to evaluate charter school performance and ensure that they treat all children fairly.

PAA's recommendations:

- Charters schools should have **neighborhood boundaries** and accept all children from within those boundaries whose parents choose to enroll their child at the charter. Charter school enrollment processes should be **consistent** with and as **simple** as those of neighborhood public schools. Charter schools **should not require excessive fees, charge financial penalties, or otherwise create a financial barrier** for students to be in school.
- Charter schools and all other schools receiving public funds must be **equally transparent and accountable** in reporting their spending, enrollment, discipline, and transfer and attrition rates, and be prevented from discriminating against special needs, homeless or low-income students, children of color or English-language learners, or any other protected class. There must be adequate monitoring and enforcement provisions to assure fairness and non-discrimination.
- Resources and monitoring are needed to insure that all children have a **safe, attractive, healthy school environment** as well as **non-discriminatory, positive discipline procedures**.
- Publicly funded charters, including those operated by management companies, must comply with Freedom of Information laws.

3 - Charter school QUANTITY v QUALITY

We are concerned that H.R. 2218 seems designed to yield a rapid and essentially unregulated increase in the quantity, but not the quality, of charter schools by prioritizing funding for those states that agree to repeal their charter caps, and by supporting full-blended or hybrid-online charter school models.

Research on charter schools shows inconsistent results. The most authoritative of controlled

studies showed that 37 percent of US charter schools have worse student outcomes than traditional public schools, less than 50 percent are on a par with them, and only 17 percent provide a superior education for their students. (Stanford/Credo 2009)

The research on online charter schools is even more problematic. According to a recent study done by the US Department of Education, online instruction for students in grades K-12 has little or no research backing. Policymakers lack scientific evidence of the effectiveness of online classes, according to the authors of the study. (Barbara Means, Sept. 2010)

An annual report of for-profit education management organizations concluded that only thirty percent of virtual schools met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as compared to fifty five percent of "brick and mortar" schools. The Pentagon currently refuses to accept graduates from online high schools into the military, since the academic standards are so low. (Suzanne Schafer, May 2011). As pointed out in a recent expose in Business Week, school administrators and academic researchers are increasingly concerned that online schools fail children and overcharge taxpayers and that the model may have been embraced more broadly as a way to overhaul public schools at the expense of actual education.

PAA's recommendation:

- Until and unless there is sufficient accountability of charter school operations, including increased federal support for state and local oversight agencies, we believe that states and districts are acting responsibly in capping the number of charter schools and should not be punished for doing so. The federal government should develop oversight standards to which states would be held accountable in order to provide consistency in monitoring and protection.

4 - EQUITY in construction funds

H. R. 2218 provides federal support to fund construction and/or renovation costs for charter schools at a level not provided for traditional public schools, despite the fact that many of the traditional public schools throughout the country are overcrowded, and these facilities are where the vast majority of students are educated. This is a problem that is becoming even more prevalent as most districts have seen increased enrollment in recent years.

PAA's recommendation:

- There is no reasonable rationale for using taxpayer funds to build more charter schools until and unless the federal government provides resources to build and renovate our traditional public schools, especially in underfunded and overcrowded urban districts, proportional to the number of students currently enrolled in them.