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Charter schools: Union on the attack

Report in best interest of public education in Del., DSEA says

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The state's largest school employee union hired a Washington, D.C., consulting firm to craft a public relations strategy for limiting the expansion of charter schools in Delaware.

The Delaware State Education Association commissioned Belden Russonello & Stewart Research and Communications to conduct public opinion research in November and December 2007 and ultimately give recommendations on the group's policy work concerning charter schools.

The 38-page report makes seven recommendations, including not to "attack charters directly," make funding the main reason for restricting the number of charters and "use teachers to carry the message."

"This is a jihad against charter schools," said Greg Meece, president of the Delaware Charter School Network. "DSEA is trying to smear and tear down charter schools. It's an all-out furor against charter schools."

Unlike district teachers, charter school teachers aren't required to be union members. Consequently, the union has few charter members because they don't see the advantage of being unionized, said Meece, who also is the school director at Newark Charter School.

DSEA continues to lobby against charter schools, Meece said. "DSEA's mission is supposed to be to support their teachers, not to bash charter schools."

DSEA President Barbara Grogg doesn't see it that way.

"Our interest is overall good public education for Delaware," Grogg said. "We have a right and a responsibility to look at the policies and develop one that is as strong as possible to ensure that schools will go forward in the future."

Grogg said tearing down charter schools has never been the intention of DSEA.

"We're anxious for charter schools to be successful," she said.

Delaware's charter school law passed in 1995. With Marion T. Academy's closure this month, the state has 16 charter schools with two more -- Prestige Academy and Delaware College Preparatory Academy -- opening this fall.

The report -- which DSEA paid for using member dues, though leaders wouldn't disclose the price -- instructs the union to use a positive approach when "convincing the public to think twice about allowing the continued expansion of charter schools." Instead of attacking charters directly, the report suggests conveying to the public the need to fix the district schools instead of sinking more resources into additional charter schools.

The report also recommends placing a limit on the portion of the state and local government budgets that can be devoted to charter schools over traditional public schools.

While conducting the poll, Belden Russonello & Stewart gathered demographic information from survey participants and identified "target audiences" that would be most receptive to the message of limiting charter school expansion. Those targeted were those with yearly household incomes of \$50,000 or less, public school parents, independents, those in union households and those in public school employee households. Kent and Sussex county residents also were singled out.

Grogg said the report was intended to be an internal poll only and not made available to the public.

"It was an internal piece to help us make some decisions about strategy as we were developing a bill that would strengthen the charter school law," she said. "Our concern was after 13 years, the charter school law needed to be revised."

After receiving a copy of the DSEA-commissioned report, lieutenant governor candidate and state Sen. Charles L. Copeland, R-West Farms, distributed copies to the public at a press conference this month.

Rep. Deborah Hudson, R-Fairthorne, said she doesn't understand why DSEA puts so much energy into charter schools when district schools have enough issues they could focus their time on.

"But charter schools have been for the most part very successful, and I think that it's causing some anxiety within DSEA," she said. "Maybe they fear some of their members will want to work in charter schools or the district students will go into charter schools."

DSEA-backed legislation

Earlier this year, two bills that would have created roadblocks for charter schools were drafted with DSEA backing. The first would allow charter schools to apply for conduit bond financing only through the Delaware Economic Development Office when seeking money at low interest rates for capital projects. After Delaware Military Academy was denied conduit bond financing in Delaware last year, it applied through the state of Arizona.

The second would require the three school districts from which the proposed charter school anticipates recruiting the largest number of students to send a written comment to the state Department of Education regarding the potential impact on the enrollment and financial condition of the school districts. The districts also would comment on whether the programs and services that would be offered by the charter school already exist in the district schools. This also would apply when established charter schools are renewing their charters. The bill also would allow the Delaware State Board of Education to limit the number of charter applications it will consider in any year or the number of charters it will grant.

Sen. Patricia Blevins, D-Elsmere, said many charter schools fill a specific niche, but if a charter is providing the same services that a district school already delivers, then its potential impact on

surrounding schools should be given more consideration.

"If a charter school is going to have a dramatic effect in enrollment, the state Department of Education needs to consider if that will hurt the district schools in the area," said Blevins, who sits on the Senate Education Committee.

Impact on school districts

Frederika Jenner, a DSEA member and teacher at A.I. duPont Middle School, said there is a definite impact on enrollment and a district's finances when students leave district schools for charter schools.

"We lose the student and the money that is attached to the student," said Jenner, who is the president of the Red Clay Education Association union. "There certainly is a lot of feelings of limited resources."

David Blowman, chief financial adviser for the Brandywine School District, said 637 students who live in his district attend charter schools. Therefore, Brandywine had to pay charters schools \$2.3 million last year for the local funding attached to those students.

Meece thinks the DSEA-backed legislation would prevent most new charters from opening and current charters from being renewed.

"Talk about setting us up for failure," he said. "We are competition. How could it ever be conceived in their best interest for a charter school to be approved? The more successful you are, the less chance you have of being approved because of the greater impact on the districts."

Application moratorium

In response to the legislation, Meece drafted a bill that would reform the state's charter school law by requiring new charter school applications to be approved by current charter leaders before being sent to Delaware Department of Education for review.

Neither the DSEA-backed bills nor Meece's bill, however, were ever introduced. Instead, a one-year moratorium on new charter school applications was narrowly passed in the Senate last week and will be voted on in the House next week.

"The charter school law hasn't been looked at in 14 years, and with any legislation, we should always go back to see if it can be improved and if it's working the way it should be," said Rep. John Viola, D-Forest Knoll.