

# Accountability for Charter Schools Is Just Good Government

By Judy Solano

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In her March 17 guest commentary, Stephanie Hancock claims that House Bill 1363 is a “brazen” and “mean-spirited” effort to harm charter schools. As a former lawmaker and public school teacher, I would argue the bill is a common-sense effort to place the same accountability and transparency requirements on charter schools that are demanded of traditional public schools.

In the 30 years since Colorado approved charter schools, legislative changes to the original law have weakened local district oversight, fiscal transparency, and accountability. The business model of competition and choice adopted by the charter industry has compromised the constitutional rights and responsibilities of locally elected school boards, increased segregation, and hindered the art of collaboration.

HB24-1363 would review 30-year-old laws and policies of charter schools in order to strengthen accountability and transparency. For example, the bill would prohibit financial conflicts of interest among the unelected members of the charter school governing boards and the for-profit education management providers.

Corporations and wealthy investors have been profiting from our public tax dollars through the chartering avenue. It’s no surprise that 11 lobbyists representing Americans for Prosperity have been hired to defeat this bill. The mission of this Koch Brothers network is to privatize public education. Taxpayers deserve to know who sits on the charter boards, how public education dollars are being spent, and who may be profiting.

Current law allows charter schools to automatically waive certain provisions of state law, primarily around teacher employment. This policy has weakened the teaching profession, resulting in high teacher turnover in charter schools. HB24-1363 would eliminate automatic waivers and require the charters to explain to parents in easy-to-understand language the rationale behind hiring at-will and unlicensed teachers.

Some charter schools pay their teachers \$10,000-\$15,000 less than traditional public schools. Empowering teachers means adopting policies that protect their rights to fair hiring and firing policies, and a paycheck that’s worthy of a licensed profession. Another fair component of the bill would require charter school administrators to evaluate their teachers using the same system as traditional public schools are required to use.

HB24-1363 also addresses the issue of managing district facilities. Under current Colorado law, charter schools are not required to pay rent for school district facilities that are available. Additionally, an independent charter school is not required to pay more than \$12 in rent per year for a building of a public school that is subject to conversion to a charter. These laws need to change. School district buildings were built and paid for by taxpayers. The duly elected board has the fiduciary obligation and the constitutional right to protect the assets of the district.

Many school districts are experiencing declining enrollment. School boards must make difficult, but necessary, financial decisions to close low-enrollment schools. Jeffco Public Schools shut down 16 elementary schools last year. It was impactful to each neighborhood, except the charter

communities. Current law shields low-enrollment charter schools from closure during times of declining enrollment. This bill would allow local school boards to fairly consider all low-enrollment schools in periods of declining enrollment.

Hancock rudely states that charter schools are a better choice because it “empowers parents and teachers ... to escape substandard conventional schools.” Statements like that promote segregation and insult the hard-working professionals in our traditional schools. To set the record straight, data from the Colorado Department of Education shows charter schools, on average, do no better academically than neighborhood schools.

No sound business establishment would wait 30 years to review and revise their policies. Neither should the government. We should expect all publicly funded schools to be held accountable by the same rules. The benefits of transparency and accountability for the taxpayers, parents, students, teachers, school boards, and local districts empower them to make important decisions.

I don't believe the Charter School Accountability bill is brazen or mean-spirited. I think it's good government, good for Colorado kids, and long overdue.

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*Judy Solano is a retired teacher and former state legislator who served 6 years as the Vice Chairwoman of the House Education Committee. She is now the leader of a local nonprofit, Advocates for Public Education Policy (A4PEP).*