

August 9, 2011

Mount Diablo Unified School District
Gary Eberhart, President, Sherry Whitmarsh, Vice-President
Members of the Mount Diablo School District Board
1936 Carlotta Drive
Concord, California 94519
(925) 682-8000 Extension: 4000

RE: CHARTER SCHOOLS

Dear President Eberhart & Members of the Board:

DO WE WANT A TWO-TIERED SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN THE MOUNT DIABLO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT WHICH UNDERMINES OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

What are Charter Schools? Charter schools are publicly financed private schools that operate largely independent of government regulation. They operate almost entirely without public accountability or oversight once established within a public school district. Charter schools produce a system where select groups of parents, administrators or private corporations (their boards are not usually elected by the public-at large), deliver one level of education in their charter school letting the public schools struggle with a lesser level of education due to the reauthorization of public school funds to a charter school.

How do they contribute to a breakdown of public schooling? They create a two-tiered education system that takes money away from the public school system without providing all of the benefits of a full public education to their charter school students. Many charter schools don't provide sport programs, extra-curricular activities, good school lunch programs, and may have limited funds for textbooks (most do not use the same ones used in public schools); thus increasing their operating costs. Charter Schools divert money and attention from improving all public schools to enhancing a few "for profit" schools with no "oversight" of how taxpayer funding is spent.

In a July 30, 2010, article on charter schools by Jill Tucker of the San Francisco Chronicle: **"...Failing charter schools across California could be shut down by the state Board of Education** under a major policy shift aimed at ensuring that the alternative public schools fulfill their role as models of academic innovation. Dozens of the state's 850 or so charter schools, which have significant freedom outside the state Education Code, fall among the lowest performing schools on standardized tests. That's unacceptable, California State Board of Education members say. "I don't have a lot of tolerance for these schools," said Board of Education member Ben Austin. "We need to be holding charter schools to at least the same standard as regular schools, if not higher."

School Lunches - The Los Angeles Times reported on January 1, 2011: "...Mealtime is more complicated at the more than 900 publicly financed charter schools in California. Unlike traditional campuses that must follow state nutrition regulations for schools, charters can make independent decisions about what's for lunch. Some charter school officials decide not to serve it at all, even if that might mean that the nutrition needs of some of the state's children are not being met... Although charters — just like traditional public schools — can get a cash subsidy from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help provide meals to children, they are exempt from a state requirement to serve at least one nutritionally adequate subsidized meal a day to qualifying children..."

Charter schools can save money by not providing school lunches and many don't have the required facilities, school lunch programs, and may not withstand public health inspections of their facilities. The Los Angeles Times (1/2/2011) stated: "...A recent (California) state audit was conducted in part to try to answer that question. Auditors were able to determine that more than half of the 815 charters active in April did participate in federal breakfast or lunch programs...However, auditors found that the state education department lacked reliable data on charters' nutrition programs...Attempts to get answers directly from charter schools met with no response in dozens of cases... Even with access to government funding, other charter schools report that they do not have the resources to feed students on campus or to comply with the numerous food safety, nutrition and administrative requirements to participate in federal food programs...There's a huge record-keeping requirement for all of these programs..." which leads to denying children programs that are available at all public schools.

Research indicates that inequalities in schooling and segregation by social class have increased in the United States since charter schools were first introduced. Most of the people who choose the alternatives are from high socio-economic status and want to impose certain types of ideology, religion, or special interest teaching on their students without public oversight. They also recruit students that are likely to perform to pre-set academic standards to market their schools to compete with the public schools while excluding students with expensive special needs or those students that aren't achieving to their required academic standards.

Many of these charter schools are run for private profit by inexperienced parents or by corporations with their own agenda. Since charter schools need additional money to operate besides public funds they must raise money through fundraisers or private corporations with varied educational agendas. Increasing numbers of charter schools in California and across the U.S. have been charged with fiscal mismanagement of public funds according to recent newspaper reports and studies. The Press Democrat (Santa Rosa, California August 12, 2011), reported that nearly \$400,000 was embezzled from the Kid Street Learning Center Charter School by their accountant who was hired because she was a supporter of the school and a nice person.

Public education represents the largest market opportunity that could be taken-over and exploited by "for profit" groups, parents, or corporate entities. The transfer of public funds for private profit, at the expense of public education for all of our children, should be rejected. Many new so-called education management organizations or private foundations are working to turn our public education system into a "for-profit model" at taxpayer expense. The end result will be that the majority of our children will receive substandard or "special interest" driven education with no public oversight or control.

In some cases students and parents find that charter schools make decisions that are not in the best interests of their students. In the case of the Mount Diablo Unified School District, the Board has to be elected by the public and therefore their decisions must be made in the public interest of all their students rather than an increase in private profits. Charter schools have no such system in place for the public to address their concerns about charter school operations, how funds are spent or type of curriculum. Teachers in many of these school may be hired or fired at any time and there are few requirements that they have the same educational standards as do teachers in public schools.

Charter schools don't reduce spending on administration parallel to already established public schools, because they must create a new and expensive administration to run their schools, diverting money away from teacher salaries and textbooks. This further reduces the money needed for the education of their students and for enriching their programs. Our public school system in Mount Diablo already has administrators in place to handle finances, day-to-day administration, insurance services, student transportation, benefits, sports programs, repairs, buildings, maintenance services,

gyms, and other facilities. The new charter school will have few of these facilities thus limiting the education of their students even more.

If, as in the case of the Mount Diablo School District, the entire high school is taken over by a charter school, it severely reduces the benefits that the students receive from belonging to the Mount Diablo Unified School District. In addition, the burden of raising additional funding, will fall squarely on the shoulders of this new private charter school which has no prior experience operating such a school. In many charter schools the employees working within this structure find their own circumstances changed as new demands for money and the demands of those in power increase their work hours and lower their income.

The public school advantages of bulk purchasing and efficiencies of scale are lost in the charter schools, making materials and services more expensive. Salaries of principals and administrators in many charter schools have soared and duplicate oversight services already provided within the public school system. There is a booming market for private enterprise inside charter schools; everything from companies that actually run schools for profit to hard-sell business advertising in classrooms.

Parent advisory committees and other groups provide an opportunity for parental input within the public school system. Many charter schools don't welcome public interference and there is no mechanism for change, through public elections, other than for parents to remove their students from charters schools if they don't like their educational program. Particular languages, areas of focus such as the arts, and special needs are already met by programs within the public school system thus reducing the need for charter schools. Many charter schools don't have the funding to either continue or offer these programs to their students due to lack of funding, expertise or interest in working with special needs children.

According to a Stanford, CA Study: "...A new report issued today by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found that there is a wide variance in the quality of the nation's several thousand charter schools with, in the aggregate, students in charter schools not faring as well as students in traditional public schools..."

"...While the report recognized a robust national demand for more charter schools from parents and local communities, it found that 17 percent of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools, while 37 percent of charter schools showed gains that were worse than their traditional public school counterparts, with 46 percent of charter schools demonstrating no significant difference..."

The report is the first detailed national assessment of charter schools. It analyzed 70% of the nation's students attending charter schools and compared the academic progress of those students with that of demographically matched students in nearby public schools. See: <http://credo.stanford.edu/>

Increasing budget cuts at all levels of government are reducing the amount of money available to public schools. Now is not the time to take additional funding away from the public school system for private charter schools. Approval of this charter school would clearly jeopardize the quality of education of all children in the Mount Diablo School District by reducing the funding for their education.

The Mount Diablo School Board should vote against this charter school proposal in order to maintain the educational standards and financial integrity of the Mount Diablo Public School District. Charter schools should not be allowed to receive taxpayers funding intended for the benefit of all of the children in our public schools. The Board should vote “no” on the new charter school and vote “yes” to protect the public interest of all the children now in public schools.

Sincerely,

Rosalind Peterson
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Website for More Information on Charter Schools:

CC: Mount Diablo Unified School District
Gary Eberhart, President
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Cheryl Hansen, Board Member
Contra Costa Times