

Commission receives public comment on proposed rules, reviews work products and conducts interviews for executive director at July meeting

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The Charter School Commission gathered for its fifth official meeting in Tacoma at the end of July. The commission received public comment on its proposed rules and commissioners reviewed minor revisions to several documents. The second half of the meeting was held in executive session. The session covered executive director candidate interviews and a discussion with legal counsel.

The meeting started with a public hearing on proposed rules. A similar hearing was held earlier in the month in Spokane, but no public comment was received. Written comments on the proposed rules have come in from across the state and several individuals provided spoken testimony at the Tacoma meeting. Some who testified wanted clearer and stronger language in the proposed rules, while others sought more generalities and flexibility.

Ken Mortland, a retired Washington teacher, was the first to share his comments. He voiced two major concerns. The first was that commission rules on conflicts of interest lacked appropriate power and needed clearer reference to Washington's code of ethics for public officials. He also wanted more specificity and stronger language to address potential retention and attrition issues of chartered schools.

Next in line was Lisa McFarland of the Washington State Charter School Association. She voiced concern that several of the commission's proposals were too specific. According to McFarland, the greatest level of detail for governing charter applicants should be in the Request for Proposal documents, rather than in the commission's adopted rules. She pointed out several examples, including the commission's proposed definition for "students at increased risk of dropping out."

This is one of the vulnerable groups that Washington charters are encouraged to serve. McFarland suggested that even though the proposed rule is specific, it still misses many at-risk groups — homeless, military kids, etc. — and would be better off without a detailed listing. Alternately, she suggested the rubric to score applications lacked specificity and needed more detailed prompting for applicants.

Seattle schools blogger Melissa Westbrook also had some comments for the commission. She reviewed several concerns about unclear language in the commission's current round of documents, including the letter of intent and language around public forum requirements. Her largest concern involved the protocol of conversion charters. According to Westbrook, state law does not specify that a school must be failing to be eligible for conversion. She suggested that the commission should ask why any conversion is taking place as a matter of protocol and also clarify what types of notice

should be given to school districts and the local community in the event of a conversion. She was pleased that governing board members of charter schools would be required to undergo background checks. Like Mortland, she wanted more focus and attention paid to attrition in the state's new charter schools.

After the first round of public comment, commission members did some technical work on a few of their working documents. Commissioners also reviewed the work that was left to be done before their next meeting. At their August meeting, commissioners will review the commission's notice of intent, vision statement, RFP, application form with instructions, and the application rubric.

The open portion of the meeting closed with a general public comment session. First up was Tacoma school board member Debbie Winskill. She shared that school districts are still carefully deciding whether or not to become authorizers, and if they do, whether they want to authorize through the commission, or go directly through the State Board of Education. Westbrook spoke again, praising the commission for including the language "students and families" in their strategic vision. She also lauded the commission for its candidate pool, sharing her opinion that the current candidates are all well-qualified for the position.

The last to speak was Dexter Gordon. He echoed Debbie Winskill's sentiments that school districts are still grappling with whether or not to become authorizers. Specifically, he wanted the commission to clarify what a school district's relationship to the ongoing process would be if they become authorizers and choose to authorize or not in any given year.

The rest of the meeting was held in executive session. The first executive session agenda item was to discuss agency litigation or potential litigation with legal counsel. This may have been related to the recent suit filed by a Washington coalition to challenge the new Charter School law. The last part of the commission's executive session was reserved for four executive director candidate interviews.

The next full meeting of the commission is scheduled for Thursday, August 22, from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. in Everett.