

## Commission reviews conflicts of interest, partnerships, protocol and staffing

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The Charter School Commission gathered for its third official meeting in Seattle at the end of May. Commissioners reviewed their search for an executive director, as well as office space for staff. Commissioners also critically evaluated their relationship with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the National Governors Association (NGA). A representative from the Gates Foundation gave a presentation, and commissioners revisited their protocol for transparency and public disclosure.

The commission is still trying to figure out what it wants to be, what relationships it wants to foster, and how it would like to function. It is caught in a precarious balancing act. On one hand, it needs help from Gates-funded organizations to meet its pressing deadlines and produce quality work. On the other hand, it wants a transparent, influence-free process that also attracts charter schools to a state that has long resisted them.

The commission further developed and outlined its relationship with NACSA at the meeting. William Haft, Vice President of Authorizer Development, suggested that NACSA's role from now on would be to develop resources, infrastructure, and practices for the commission. This includes approval and denial guidelines for the first round of charter school applications. NACSA would implement these through three core strands. These include working with the commission, helping the State Board of Education on applications, and providing direct support to school districts.

During the meeting, commission members voiced concern about the extensive role of the Gates Foundation throughout the charter authorization process. One cited the potential conflict of interest for school districts that have Gates Foundation support and are then judged on Gates Foundation-funded guidelines. Members also questioned how the commission can be made aware of the relationship and communications between the Gates Foundation and NACSA.

William Haft said that the extensive Gates Foundation support is intended to impart quality training, not an institutional perspective. He said it's taken a while to instill a strong principle of quality into Charter Schools as opposed to just autonomy and free market principles. The state charter law sets up who an authorizer can be, Haft said, while his job is to help out the eventual authorizers to do their jobs well.

Don Shalvey, a Deputy Director of the Gates Foundation, reviewed the history of charter schools nationally. The foundation's position on charters is largely based in Shalvey's department. He said the foundation's primary focus was to help ensure Washington's authorization process is thoughtful and has integrity.

The commission also reviewed a proposal from the National Governor's Association offering technical support. With funding from the Walton Foundation, the NGA offered to provide additional recommendations for the review process and state action plan. The grant-funded support was only for the upcoming

ing year. The commission approved a motion to discuss and move forward with the NGA offer.

In spite of all the concerns about influence, autonomy, and transparency, Seattle schools blogger Melissa Westbrook praised the commission for its openness during the meeting's public comment session. Westbrook has been a longtime skeptic of charter schools.

While the commission chose to not work on a full conflict-of-interest policy during this session, it did discuss policies for visitation, travel, and other charter operator solicitations. Commissioners debated adoption of five commission protocols aimed at ethics and transparency. There was general agreement about not accepting gifts of any form from charter school organizations, but members disagreed about policies on visitations and disclosure of visitations.

Some commissioners believed that if they paid for travel and other expenses, they should be able to visit various charter schools and not be forced to recuse themselves from decision making if the school eventually applied to operate in Washington. For these commissioners, not allowing visits could inhibit increased understanding of what makes a school successful. For others, any perception of favoritism should be avoided. They said the commission needs to be as publicly transparent as possible. The commission vigorously debated the issue, but reached no conclusion. Final decisions for these principles and protocols were moved to the June meeting agenda.

Other big issues at the meeting included deciding on an office location for commission staff, the search for an executive director, and the legal mandate to favor certain charter school applications over others.

By law, preference for charter school applications must be given to those that focus on at-risk and other underrepresented students. The commission deliberated how they could create a protocol for use with the application process. This is where the commission faced another difficult balance. How does it prioritize applicants that serve these students and still credit other applicants that appear to have a higher likelihood of general effectiveness?

William Haft from NACSA suggested two alternatives. One is to openly state that the commission is looking for applicants who will serve at-risk students. The other is to offer incentives for applicants that focus on at-risk and underrepresented students, such as facility and other special support. Haft said that the selection process should really be geared toward granting charters that are ready. If there are many acceptable applicants, a preference could then be given to applicants that identify at-risk students as their focus. He encouraged the commission to not underestimate the power of the bully pulpit in influencing the types of applications that it receives.

Commission members also reviewed the office space for their future staff. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction has offered to house the commission's new office on its premises. While commissioners are still debating whether or not to accept OSPI's offer, it appears very likely that their office will be placed in the Olympia area.

Commissioners continued development of their process for screening and assessing applications for the commission's executive director position. Commissioners agreed on a general method and timeline for filling the position, and planned to bring in some final candidates to the June meeting. However the first round of candidate interviews was held in executive session.