

Richard Meinhard, Ph.D.

February 18, 2014

To: Chair, House Ed Committee, Rep Gelser

Charter as a Strategy by the Legislature—In 1999 the legislature created a new strategy for promoting educational change and improvement, the legislature’s charter strategy which created opportunity for change-oriented teachers and educators. The legislature saw it needed a choices to free itself from its exclusive dependence on the single district provider model of delivery; creating a charter sector made sense. Public education as former AFT president Al Shanker pointed out is not defined as public schools. It means education that is publicly supported, free, non-discriminatory, and with public oversight.

The Response of Districts—But the politics of the big education organizations are that they have enjoyed their exclusive franchise over educational services in their geographical districts and their exclusive access to the state school fund. In the face of the charter sector created by the legislature, it is hard for some conservative school boards, apparently the Portland School Board, not to think of charters as taking too many of their students, too much of their money, and too large a part of their education agenda for students. They are uncomfortable with too many charter schools. Their almost exclusive power over chartering makes it understandable they might want to expand this power so as to limit the chartering movement.

That’s the wrong response. The big districts’ school boards’ response (and some have indeed progressively responded in this way) should be to say to their organization:

“Parents want more options, teachers want more professional opportunities, low performing students want more motivating schools; we see chartering as a progressive response to our consumers of public education, our community and families. If our district organization can’t respond to these needs, then charters will lead the way. Charter is a strategy of change that the legislature has created.”

The Legislature’s Liberal Versus the Districts’ Protection Seeking Goal—The districts’ concerns for making things comfortable for themselves are not the legislatures’ concerns. The legislature’s concerns lie with our common liberal agenda of free, non-discriminatory public education open to all; both Democrats and Republicans share that public education value.

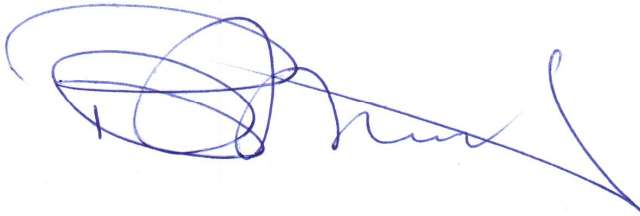
Perhaps legislators may need to remind districts of this liberal agenda. As liberals, we are concerned for helping underserved students and families (look at the injustice behind the dropout rate and the lack of motivation created not by bad but by mis-fitting schools). Second, we consider the liberal values of equality harmed by the horrible injustice to the most vulnerable, the failing, low income and minority subclasses who cannot thrive and as a result will not join our productive sectors of society. Third we note the liberal agenda of protecting the consumer side, the students and families of ed services, from the provider side, the large and powerful organizations. The legislature no longer gives them permission to arbitrarily impose their power and agendas on families and kids. Fourth, we note the

liberal agenda of helping teachers, the unionized wage workers without career opportunities, by opening a new professional path for teachers who can now own their learning program and become professionals in their own right. Finally, it seems obvious but worth mentioning what is called the common good of society, the equality under law against special favors granted to a small group of special interests, in this case, the 8 rent-seeking districts. Charter is not a threat but a liberal hope for public education.

It is surely uncomfortable for liberals to put aside the advancement of public education and students in order to grant special favors to make things comfortable for 8 districts. Particularly in large districts, no matter their boards' good intentions, the board members are not omniscient regarding the diversity of their students' needs and values, nor will they be challenged and empowered to make significant changes if the charter sector is aborted just so they are made comfortable. Protecting the big districts is conservative, not progressive; it is a cry for protection and stasis.

Please, for the sake of our children, the desperate need for improving public education for the under served, and the professional opportunities for teachers, help the big education organizations see their plea for special favors from the legislature in SB 1538 is the very opposite of what they and public education needs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Richard Meinhard', with a large, stylized initial 'R'.

Richard Meinhard, Ph.D.