

House Education Committee Members ,

We, the representatives of three Oregon charter schools, are writing to you regarding the issues caused by some aspects of current laws pertaining to public charter schools. We think the best way to illustrate these issues is anecdotally with the situation faced by Coburg Community Charter School. This situation is not unique to Coburg, though.

At one time Coburg maintained its own local school district that had the responsibility of schooling community children from first grade through high school. The Coburg district merged with the larger Eugene district roughly fifty years ago. At that time the local high school was closed. Later the upper elementary grades were shifted to Eugene area middle schools, leaving only a K-5 elementary school in the town itself. This small community school was often the target for closure lists whenever budgets were tight. The local state representative, Phil Barnhart, spoke to the school board on behalf of keeping the school in this community. Finally, in 2009, word came that the school would be closed. This closure would leave a huge hole in the community.

The people of Coburg rallied and created a proposal to convert the soon-to-be closed school to a public charter school in an effort to keep the school in the community. The proposal was approved, and in 2010 Coburg Community Charter School reopened the doors of our local school. It was a tremendous effort by many people, but the community now had a school!

The mission of Coburg Community Charter School is to serve to the community by providing quality local education. This mission was an important factor in the approval of our proposal by our sponsoring district. Historically, Coburg School served mainly area families with a few families choosing to attend from outside the attendance boundary. As a charter school, there has been a surge of interest from families from all over the district. This interest has required CCCS to hold a lottery for enrollment every year after its initial year.

The legalities of charter school enrollment are covered by ORS 338.125. These rules do not allow for any geographically based priority groups. Therefore, just in terms of sheer numbers, Coburg area students are actually at a disadvantage in our lottery. We have tried to remedy this issue through the only means available to us under the law. We sought and received a waiver from the State Board of Education to allow priority placement in the lottery for students residing within the attendance boundary of the former Coburg School, so long as the number of Coburg residents remains below fifty percent of the total school population. This waiver was granted to us for two years initially and has been renewed twice, once for one year and once for two years.

The State Board of Education is a group of appointed individuals with different backgrounds, levels of expertise, and educational philosophies. This creates a rich background of experience and engagement for the board while debating various aspects of education in the state, but the shifting expectations and interpretations of the board itself make it a fairly unstable governance body for issues regarding school attendance policies.

Instead of petitioning their sponsoring districts, charter schools must petition the State Board which may or may not have the necessary insight into the particular needs of that school at that time. CCCS, for example, was granted its charter by Eugene 4j with the expectation that it would fulfill its mission to serve Coburg students. The State Board then must approve a waiver so that CCCS can fulfill its mission. If they revoke the waiver, or disallow this type of waiver, which is within their purview, then CCCS is left with no legal way to fulfill its mission and its duties within its sponsoring district. It is not an effective or helpful system. I propose altering regulations governing charter schools to reflect the emergence of schools like CCCS.

When charter schools were first allowed under Oregon law they were primarily schools that sought to serve families seeking a unique pedagogical experience that differed from those offered at neighborhood schools. The laws were established to prevent a small powerful group from using charter law to create a publically funded school and then determining who could or could not attend it. The law sought to promote equity in that way.

What has happened over the years is that a different type of charter school has emerged in reaction to consolidations caused by reduced funding and loss of local control. Communities facing the loss of their schools have turned to public charter schools as a way to maintain schools that were once neighborhood schools. These conversion schools already have an established attendance area that is known and understood in those areas.

Growing dissatisfaction among families with children in public schools has caused parents to look for alternatives for their children. Some of these families have the means to transport their children out of their neighborhoods, or even out of their cities, in search of what they hope will be a better educational experience for their children. Conversion charter schools are caught between the mission to serve their communities and the growing numbers of families seeking alternatives.

Under the current law these schools cannot give any type of priority to local families. The larger number of students from outside the community then displaces local families. Connections are lost and the very mission of the school goes largely unserved.

The solution to this rather complex problem is fairly simple. We need to amend charter law to allow charter schools to maintain the attendance boundaries in place at the time of closure of the area community school if they so choose.

Sincerely,

Leah Claypool, Co-Founder of Coburg Community Charter School  
Mark Hazelton, Co-Founder and Director of Kings Valley Charter School  
Darla Meeuwsen, Director of Sauvie Island Academy