

# **Illinois State Board of Education Independent Charter School Authorizer Task Force**

**December 14, 2009**

At 1:41 p.m. the fifth meeting of the Independent Charter School Authorizer Task Force was called to order by Darren Reisberg of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE).

After welcoming the task force members, Mr. Reisberg requested a roll call. All members were present. A list of the task force members in attendance appears on the final page of this document. In addition to the appointed task force members, Bette Bergeron from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville was in attendance to represent Illinois institutions of higher education. Eight guests attended the meeting, but none of them spoke during the public participation period.

Clarice Berry made a motion to approve the minutes from the November 17<sup>th</sup> meeting which was seconded by Nicole Gales. The minutes were unanimously approved by the task force.

Co-chair Reisberg opened the meeting by briefly reviewing several documents he provided for the task force, including examples of memos related to charter denials or appeals to the Illinois State Board of Education and a spreadsheet detailing all of the charter denials, disapprovals and non-renewals in Illinois from 1996 through the present.

Co-chair Reisberg invited Bette Bergeron to open the meeting. Dr. Bergeron, representing the deans of colleges of education from public universities in the state, shared with the task force four options related to charter school authorization that she presented to the deans: no involvement; each university authorizing separately; a representative from at least one of the universities serving as a voice for higher education on a statewide authorizing body; and a center, through which all of the public universities would collaboratively serve as a charter schools authorizer. With this center option, there would be a Board, a director located at one of the twelve public universities, and community teams who could serve schools in the field statewide. All of the deans preferred the latter option. Dr. Bergeron argued this option would be advantageous because it would enhance P-20 connections in Illinois, provide opportunities for universities to share best practices and take advantage of the geographic distribution of universities and the existing infrastructure and research capabilities that are currently housed within the universities. The center would require start-up funding from the state, but could be self-supporting after that initial funding if they received an authorizing fee from their charter schools. In sum, institutions of higher education are interested in authorizing charter schools in the state and believe they have something to offer.

In response to questions from task force members about local control and considering exclusive authority for districts in Illinois, Dr. Bergeron responded that the universities had not yet considered how their proposal would address those two important issues. Collin Hitt and Dea Meyer commended Dr. Bergeron on the proposal. Ms. Meyer remarked that the infrastructure that the universities currently house will be important and that she supported another authorizing option in the state in case the leaders of Chicago Public Schools decide not to support charters in

the same way that they have in the past. Clarice Berry provided a counter-argument, noting that teachers who complete certification programs at many public universities are too often ill-prepared to handle the challenges of urban schools. Dr. Bergeron responded that universities receive a great deal of bad press, that urban-specific programs at some public universities are preparing teachers effectively, that all certification programs include a field-based component, and that universities are preparing novice teachers, not experts. Darren Reisberg remarked that ISBE is currently working with institutions of higher education to improve teacher preparation programs and make such programs accountable for the teachers and leaders they train. Laurie Preece commented that one advantage of a higher education authorizer would be to create a stronger connection between teacher and leader preparation programs at universities and charter schools that may be authorized by universities. Dr. Bergeron agreed and further remarked that this connection could help universities to develop a deep understanding of best practices in charter schools and to feed those practices back into teacher preparation programs.

In response to a question about accountability from Sharon Teefey, Dr. Bergeron remarked that a potential university authorizer would be accountable to the State Board of Education. Ms. Teefey commented that the charter school that is currently operated by Southern Illinois University is one of the lowest-performing schools in the state according to the list that was recently released by ISBE. Thus, should a university that is not currently running an effective charter be allowed to authorize charters statewide? Dr. Bergeron replied that although their school is on the list, outcomes other than student achievement are important to consider, such as attendance and entrance into post-secondary programs.

A group of task force members and guests from schools districts outside of Chicago then provided the task force with their perspective about authorizing. Presenters included Paul Swanstrom and Michael Bartlett of the task force, Jules Gaudin, Deputy Superintendent/Chief Operations Officer from Waukegan Public School District 60, and Diane Rutledge from the Large Unit District Association (LUDA) in Illinois. During their October meeting, the task force heard from advocates for a charter school that had been denied by the school board in Waukegan. Mr. Gaudin presented the school district's side of the story. He noted that the charter school operator was not part of the community and did not work in collaboration with district leaders to bring a charter school to the district. After carefully reviewing the application, the school district denied the charter because the application contained incorrect information, provided an inadequate budget and the charter school operator did not demonstrate its ability to improve student achievement nor to comply with state and federal requirements for services for students with disabilities and English Language Learners.

Paul Swanstrom, Superintendent of Joliet Township High School District 204, then described an application for a charter school in his district. Although district leaders were excited by the idea of a charter in the district at the first mention of the proposal, the application that they received was not viable. As a result, the charter was denied. The applicant appealed to ISBE, but ISBE upheld the school district's decision. Mr. Swanstrom and Michael Bartlett agreed that, because of strong local control in Illinois, only school districts should authorize charters in Illinois because district leaders best understand the local context. Mr. Swanstrom further commented that all districts must meet the needs of kids and charter schools may or may not be the best way to meet students' needs.

Diane Rutledge then spoke as the executive director for LUDA and as the former superintendent of public schools in Springfield. She noted that every district has different needs. In Springfield, she had a positive experience with charter schools. District leaders in Springfield noticed that enrollment in the public schools was beginning to decline. In order to encourage residents to remain in the city and stay in the public schools, district leaders worked closely with the Ball Foundation to develop a charter school that would serve as a laboratory school for the district. This charter school has been one of the highest performing charters in the state and the charter has been renewed twice since its inception. The school provides parents with choice and gives the district an opportunity to learn from best practices at the charter school. As the executive director of LUDA, Dr. Rutledge pointed out that large districts in Illinois do have the capacity to authorize, but charter schools must provide some benefit to the district. Based on her experience in Springfield, she encouraged charter school applicants to open lines of communication with district leaders and to build relationships.

In response to a comment from Mr. Gaudin about the current Illinois charter school legislation that allows charters to receive up to 125% of the per-pupil funding that the district receives, the task force engaged in a discussion of the percentage that is necessary to operate a charter. Dr. Rutledge responded that the charter school in Springfield receives approximately 83% of the district's share, but that the district provides a number of services for the charter school including transportation, food services and special education services. Jaime Guzman noted funding was equitable in Chicago for traditional and charter schools, but it is hard to determine an exact percentage because funding is not calculated in the same way for charter and traditional public schools.

Representative William Burns then opened a discussion about the demand for public choice options in districts across the state because the constituents in his legislative district are asking for more high school options. Mr. Swanstrom responded that there was little demand in his district because the district provides a variety of options. Dr. Rutledge commented that district leaders decided to create public choice options in Springfield, but it was a district decision and not the result of demand from the community. Greg Richmond, a former official at Chicago Public Schools, recalled numerous conversations he had with parents who were desperate for more safe and high-quality options for their children. Dea Meyer argued that charters are one way to increase the options that are available and that families should have choice. Collin Hitt supported this position and observed that 75% of the charter schools in Illinois are currently in Chicago, but the district only serves 25% of students statewide. As a result, he contended that additional choices are needed in districts outside of Chicago. Sharon Teefey disagreed because she sees less of a push for charters outside of Chicago. She described a charter school in Cahokia that was authorized by the district, but their renewal was denied when their financials and student performance did not meet community standards. When two candidates who supported the charter ran for the school board, they received little support, indicating that the community does not strongly support charters in that school district.

Co-chair Reisberg then asked each task force member to state their position so he and co-chair Steans could determine the best way to move forward. He remarked that ISBE does not have the capacity to authorize, so an independent statewide authorizer should be considered if some

districts are not interested in authorizing or if a district rejects an application for a charter without providing the applicant with a fair opportunity for success. However, districts should have the opportunity to first choose whether they will authorize or if they prefer to send the applicant to an independent statewide authorizer. In addition, an independent authorizer would require sufficient resources to operate successfully. Dr. Koch will bring the issue to the State Board in 2010. Co-chair Reisberg further observed that ISBE cannot currently revoke district authorized charters, but that the law should provide the state with the authority to intervene and revoke any charter if that charter is not successful.

Sharon Teefey supports local control and the current legislation that provides charter school applicants with the right to appeal. She noted that the current law also allows for a referendum process, a democratic process that any community could choose if they are committed to opening a charter school in their district. She would like districts to receive more information about the current legislation and would like any new resources to be directed to ISBE to build capacity at the state education agency. She pointed out that the state does not currently give districts adequate resources to operate, so would a statewide authorizer be the best use of limited resources? If there were to be a statewide independent authorizer, she would prefer that school districts retain the right to authorize and they could defer to a statewide authorizer if they choose not to authorize.

Co-chair Steans supports an independent statewide authorizer for cases in which there might not be due diligence during district reviews of charter school applications.

Representative Burns supports an independent statewide authorizer. He would like the task force or the legislature to define a set of criteria that any authorizer in the state would have to meet before being given the power to authorize charter schools.

Todd Ziebarth supports an independent statewide authorizer. He noted that the goal is not to increase the number of charter schools, but instead to improve the quality of the authorizing process in the state as a whole. In fact, an independent statewide authorizer could help district authorizers improve their authorizing practices, as has happened in Colorado. He pointed out that any new legislation would need to be clear about defining the roles and responsibilities of authorizers. He would like to see a new statewide authorizer to provide an option for applicants, but there should not be more than one statewide authorizer. Districts could then choose either to authorize or to send applicants to the statewide authorizer. There might be an opt-out in the legislation for districts that are currently strong authorizers, like Chicago and Springfield. Funding and accountability for the authorizers will also be critical issues to be addressed in the new legislation.

Laurie Preece supports an independent statewide authorizer. She commented that districts will need to demonstrate their capacity to authorize because there is great variability in capacity across districts statewide. In addition, she noted that while the referendum process in current law is democratic, it is also burdensome.

Collin Hitt supports an independent statewide authorizer. He argued that the status quo is not an option because there is demand for a high-quality independent authorizer. An independent

authorizer could also provide some competition for districts, which could encourage them to strengthen their authorization process.

Traci Cobb-Evans agrees with Sharon Teefey that the status quo is preferable and respects local control in Illinois. She would like to see the existing legislation strengthened so that failing charter schools are not allowed to renew their charters. If there is a statewide authorizer, she agreed that accountability would be an important issue for the legislature to address.

Sean Denney also supported the status quo because he has not heard a compelling reason to change the existing legislation.

Dea Meyer thinks an independent statewide authorizer is a good idea and that both districts and universities should apply to the state and meet certain requirements in order to be allowed to authorize. She argued that the vast majority of students are not proficient on NAEP, an indication that families need more high-quality educational options.

Greg Richmond supports an independent statewide authorizer. He was involved with the legislation that was first introduced in 1995; however, he observed that not much has happened with charter schools outside of Chicago in the last fifteen years. A new authorizing agency must meet high standards and should ensure that all charter schools provide a quality education for all students and treat them fairly.

If there is a statewide authorizer, Jaime Guzman argued that Chicago would want exclusive authority to authorize in their school district. Chicago has worked hard over the last fifteen years to improve the quality of their authorization process and to ensure that there are a number of high-quality options for all students in Chicago. He will lead efforts to continue to refine the authorizing process, making it even more rigorous and more selective, but also demanding more accountability from the charter schools in the district. He also noted that if there is an opt-out process from a statewide authorizer, the criteria should be clear and objective. Co-chair Reisberg asked that Mr. Guzman look carefully at the Colorado legislation and provide comments.

Nicole Gales supports the status quo and then. She believes that the authorization process must start with the district and with building district capacity to authorize. She is interested in further exploring the opportunity for a higher education authorizer because of the P-20 connections that Dr. Bergeron described.

Clarice Berry supports the status quo. If there is an independent authorizer, she would vote for the local education agency to retain their exclusive authority and for ISBE to have the right to revoke charters. She is not opposed to charter schools, but has serious concerns about whether or not charter schools are serving the students who need them most. She wants to make sure that charters are held to the same standards as traditional schools. She further encouraged Chicago Public Schools to do a better job of informing parents about the options that are currently available and to aggressively search for those parents who want alternative options, but do not currently understand how to access the system.

Michael Bartlett supports the status quo. He does not believe it is the case that school boards would deny a charter without first examining the application carefully. He does not support taking money from districts to authorize charters, but would support sending more money to ISBE.

Paul Swanstrom also supports the status quo. He believes that the state should hold districts accountable for their actions. He argued that district leaders want the best for kids, make decisions based on that principle, and should be held accountable for upholding that principle. If the district does not give charter applicants a fair hearing, the applicants can appeal to the state. Allowing an independent statewide authorizer could also be harmful to districts because districts could lose some of their students to charter schools and could lose funds to support the students who remain in the district. Finally, if the legislature does create an independent authorizer, it will be essential to build in oversight and accountability for the authorizer.

Before concluding the meeting, co-chair Reisberg asked task force members to continue to hold the morning of December 22, 2009 for a final task force meeting.

The meeting was adjourned by co-chair Reisberg at 4:25 p.m.

**Illinois State Board of Education  
Independent Charter School Authorizer Task Force**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>12/14</b>
Michael Bartlett	Illinois Association of School Boards	Present
Clarice Berry	Chicago Principals and Administrators Association	Present
Representative William Burns	Illinois General Assembly	Present
Traci Cobb-Evans	Chicago Teachers Union	Present
Sean Denney	Illinois Education Association	Present
Nicole Gales	Springfield Ball Charter School	Present
Jaime Guzman	Office of New Schools - Chicago Public Schools	Present
Collin Hitt	Illinois Policy Institute	Present
Dea Meyer	Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago	Present
Laurie Preece	Rockford Charter Schools Initiative	Present
<i>Co-Chair</i> Darren Reisberg	Illinois State Board of Education	Present
Greg Richmond	National Association of Charter School Authorizers	Present
<i>Co-Chair</i> Senator Heather Steans	Illinois General Assembly	Present
Paul Swanstrom	Superintendent, Joliet Township High School District 204	Present
Sharon Teefey	Illinois Federation of Teachers	Present
Todd Ziebarth	National Alliance for Public Charter Schools	Present