

Dr. Roy, right on cue (21)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Charter Schools, Education, Serious Issues June 4, 2019

(21st in a series on Education and Charter Schools)

Gadfly no sooner re-awakens the charter school thread than an essay by our Dr. Roy and Allentown superintendent Thomas Parker appeared!

Thomas Parker and Joseph Roy, "Why tighter controls are needed for charter schools." Morning Call, June 1, 2019.

Our message to the General Assembly is clear: The need to overhaul Pennsylvania's charter school law is real and urgent. School districts need better tools to hold charter school operators accountable to families and taxpayers.

The commonwealth has an ethical and moral responsibility to its public school students to ensure charter schools are held to the same state academic standards as district schools. It also has a fiscal responsibility to taxpayers to ensure funds invested in charters are a good investment and are safeguarded against misuse. Current charter law falls woefully short on these fronts and many others.

HB 356 and 357 create more risk for students, local districts and taxpayers. We vehemently oppose these bills. The legislation would undermine local control by allowing charter schools, including the poorest performers, to expand without the authorizing district's knowledge or approval. These new and unbudgeted expenses would wreak financial havoc for the school districts that would have to absorb them.

Newly proposed charter legislation also frees charters from oversight that is necessary to ensure they are meeting academic standards. They make it harder to close underperforming charters and allow unfettered expansion of charters — even those with failing performance — without regard for their ability to successfully operate. The proposed standard charter application form lacks information on an applicant’s experience, finances, past performance and operational ability, all of which are necessary to meaningfully assess whether the applicant can sustain a school that meets the needs of the very students it aspires to serve.

Two other bills, HB 355 and HB 358, would correct questionable charter school practices such as staffing boards with family members. They set clear conflict-of-interest provisions, require schools to follow accepted accounting standards and promote budget and operating transparency. These changes are welcome and long overdue, but do not offset the harm to school districts from the overall charter package.

School districts statewide are proactively advocating for significant amendments that promote high-quality charters. Real charter reform must require greater accountability. It must set clear performance goals for charter schools and hold them to the same need-based special education funding model as school districts. It must also give authorizers the tools needed to ensure charter operators are living up to their promise and providing our students the education they deserve.

Pa. Attorney General Eugene DePasquale is often quoted as saying that our charter school law is the worst in the nation, but this article passed on by Dr. Roy earlier indicates California and New Jersey vie for that honor as well.

Jeremy Mohler, “Charter schools are starting to look a lot like payday lenders and for-profit colleges.” In the Public Interest, March 28, 2019.

The *Los Angeles Times* published an expose of a wealthy couple who have pocketed millions of public dollars running charter schools across Los Angeles. Clark and Jeanette Parker founded Today's Fresh Start Charter School in 2003 and quickly expanded it into three campuses. They eventually began paying themselves high consulting fees and \$800,000 annually to rent buildings they own, all with taxpayer money. They now live in a 7,700-square-foot home in Beverly Hills with an estimated value of about \$15.3 million.

NorthJersey.com dropped a bombshell [five-part](#) investigative series with the point blank headline: "Millions of your tax dollars have disappeared into NJ's flawed charter school experiment." The highlight of the series is deep dive into the nationwide web of investors, developers, and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) — which get massive tax breaks — cashing in on charter school buildings. Some familiar faces appear: Goldman Sachs and other Wall Street banks.

Charter schools, as we reported last time, are part of Allentown's severe budget woes. Fortunately, as also reported last time, BASD has avoided a tax increase for now, though Lehigh Valley Academy is proposing a new \$50 million campus.

Though the quality of the three charter schools in Bethlehem is fine and they are free from the corruption that is pervasive elsewhere, Dr. Roy continues to lead the charge for badly needed legislative change.