

Charter School Explosion: Accountable to Whom?

By Pat Hall

The scariest thing about the charter school industry is the move towards for-profit management, possible influence peddling in Florida government, and the lack of transparency. The “wild west” business model doesn’t work for education. Ample warnings exist in large cities like New Orleans, Chicago and Philadelphia about where this privatization issue is headed. The issues of profit are trumping the public good. Recently at the National Convention of the League of Women Voters of the United States, I met the President of the Louisiana LWV. Shocking as this sounds, by September of 2014, ALL public schools in New Orleans will be charter schools!

Charter schools began as experiments in public education, proposed and run by a group of dedicated parents, educators and community representatives, who promised to make the children the beneficiaries of their innovations. In exchange for this promise, the authorizing school district would provide loose oversight. The arrangement was a partnership based on trust. But, increasingly the promise has been broken, and, as a recent *Sun Sentinel* article (June 18, 2014) said, a growing number of charter school operators in Florida are going “unsupervised”, and as a result the quality of the education children receive suffers.

At the charter school level, many of the boards of directors are unprepared for the complexities of school administration and either fail or hire a for-profit management company to handle administrative tasks. In some cases, the for-profit company creates its own board with little or no local representation... no teachers, no parents... and in the case of Charter Schools USA often holds its very infrequent board meetings hundreds of miles from the local schools it represents. Charters are only granted to non-profit boards of directors representing “Public Charter Schools”. Ken Haiko is the Board Chair for 36 of those non-profit school boards representing 36 individual charter schools throughout the state, which are managed by Charter Schools USA. These are all unpaid, volunteer positions; when does he have time to earn a living?

Multiple cases have been documented of principals and administrators with lavish six-figure salaries and fraudulent expenses. As we have reported previously, charter and traditional public school teachers are required to be certified in Florida but principals have no such requirements, resulting in unqualified and inept administration at some charter locations. At best, taxpayer dollars are being siphoned off to pay huge management and leasing fees and at worst our hard-earned dollars go into the pockets of unscrupulous managers. Unless charter schools are doing a better job of educating children than traditional schools, there is no reason to have them! “This isn’t just a regular business. This isn’t a restaurant that you just open up, you serve food, people

don't like it, you close it and move on," said Krystal Castellano, a former teacher at the now-closed Next Generation Charter School in Lauderdale Lakes. "This is education; this is students getting left in the middle of the year without a school to go to." In Hillsborough County we had 2,601 "YOYO" children representing 19% of the charter population who went to charter schools and then returned to traditional schools within the last year.

At the district level, there are few controls due to Florida laws aimed more at promoting the schools than policing them. Due to actions of the current Legislature and Governor, there is still less per pupil funding in the 2014-15 education budget than in 2007. As a result, the staff providing oversight is pinched. In Hillsborough County an additional supervisor, Jeremy Klein, was needed to assist Jenna Hodgens, Director of Charter Schools, with the myriad of details in charter school oversight. Compared to other states, it is comparatively easy to open a charter school in Florida. While the application is detailed, there are no criminal, financial or educational background checks. This topic will be addressed in our last article next week. Because of this laxity the result is that charters open, get taxpayer dollars and close, and school districts cannot recoup the funds. The *Sun Sentinel* article revealed that in South Florida a "man named Trayvon Mitchell of Oakland Park received \$450,000 in tax dollars to open two new Ivy Academies, just months after his first school collapsed. The schools shuttled students among more than four locations in Broward County, including a public park, an event hall and two churches." Teachers had school supplies in the trunks of their cars awaiting early morning calls to know where to meet their students! Both schools closed in seven weeks.

This accountability mess ultimately rests with the Florida Legislature who passed the charter school friendly laws drafted at the request of Jeb Bush by Jon Hage, now CEO of Charter Schools USA. A number of Florida legislators have profited from their various connections to charter schools. Miami Rep. Erik Fresen (R), Chairman of Education Appropriations Subcommittee for 2013, was accused of ethics charges for not disclosing his family connection to the largest for-profit charter operator in Florida, Academica. In addition, Academica's business practices are being audited by the Inspector General's Office of the U.S. Department of Education. Erik Fresen's sister is Academica's Vice President and his brother-in-law, Fernando Zulueta its owner. Fresen was a former lobbyist for Academica. Zulueta has contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the campaigns of many other legislators. Additionally, Zulueta has served on Jon Hage's board of directors for Charter Schools USA. At the end of 2012, Academica was the largest for-profit charter management company in Florida with 72 schools.

Additional legislative conflicts include Sen. John Thrasher (R), a former charter school lobbyist, who has repeatedly proposed easing charter school laws. Rep. Will Weatherford (R), Speaker of the House for the last two sessions, submitted a charter

school application along with the wife of Rep. Richard Corcoran in Pasco County; they were turned down by the Pasco County School Board. Sen. John Legg (R), Chairman of Education Committee, has founded and serves as business manager of Day Spring Academy in New Port Richey since 2000. His wife Suzanne is the director of the charter school earning \$62,955 for 2011-12, while Legg earned \$48,412 in addition to his legislative salary. Unlike most charter school administrators, Legg is a certified social studies teacher.

Rep. Seth McKeel (R) owns charter school, McKeel Academy in Polk County. Sen. Anitere Flores (R), Senate Majority Whip in 2013, became Academica's leader for their charter college in Doral in Miami after encouraging a virtual charter school bill. Rep. George Moratis (R), of Ft.Lauderdale has repeatedly sponsored charter school legislation to benefit for-profit management companies; at the same time he has taken hundreds of dollars in donations from Jon Hage, Charter Schools USA headquartered in Ft. Lauderdale. Our own Hillsborough Rep. Betty Reed (D) has abstained from voting on charter bills because her daughter, Dr. Cametra Edwards, is the principal of Village of Excellence Charter School in Temple Terrace.

The not-so-hidden agenda of the charter school advocates appears to be the elimination of teacher unions, teacher tenure and ultimately public schools - the bedrock of our democratic society. Do you see the pattern of the web of influence? Subordinating children's educational needs to for-profit management companies will not create the human capital we need for the future of America.