

## WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S CHARTER SCHOOL (Philadelphia Version)

In Pennsylvania, charter schools are *public schools* created by agreement (a “charter”) with a local school board. The Philadelphia School District has approved more charter schools than any other district in the state. Charter schools are considered alternatives to traditional public schools. Please see ELC’s “**Charter Schools-Frequently Asked Questions**” fact sheet for more general information about charter schools.

Charter schools do not have to follow some laws that other public schools must follow. However, charter schools *must* comply with laws protecting *civil rights* and *student health and safety*. In addition, charter schools *must* obey state law when they suspend or expel students (for example, the charter school must hold a formal hearing prior to expelling a student). For more information about disciplinary protections, see ELC’s fact sheet entitled, “**Suspensions and Expulsions in Pennsylvania.**” Charter schools also *must* obey *federal special education laws*.

Charter schools are a new experiment in Pennsylvania. The first charter schools in Pennsylvania opened in 1997. Charter schools increase the number of tuition-free educational options for students. Some people believe that charter schools can be more creative than other public schools in meeting the needs of children, families, and the community. However, some families are having difficulties with some charter schools. This fact sheet is for parents who have concerns about their child’s charter school. (Please note that this fact sheet does not address issues about *cyber charter schools*.)

If you feel that a charter school is violating your child’s rights, here are **some steps** you can take to try to resolve the situation:

- *First talk to the administrator of the charter school.* It is often helpful to meet in person.
- *Write a letter to the administrator of the charter school* explaining the problem and suggesting how the problem might be addressed.
- If things can’t be worked out with the administrator, *write a letter to and/or attend a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the charter school and voice your concerns.*

➔The **Board of Trustees** is the **governing body** of the charter school, and it➔  
must hold regular meetings that are open to the public.

- Talk to other parents of children who attend the charter school. If their children are experiencing similar problems, or they have similar concerns, *go to the Board of Trustees as a group.* There is strength in numbers. Get involved with parent groups that might already exist in the school. Form your own parents’ group.
- *If your child has a disability,* and the charter school is not providing him or her with the special education services listed on his or her IEP, you can file a complaint with the

Pennsylvania Department of Education or the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. You can also ask for a special education due process hearing or special education mediation if the charter school is refusing to evaluate your child or is not providing your child with an appropriate special education program. For more information on the rights of children with disabilities, please see ELC's "**Charter Schools and Children with Disabilities**" fact sheet.

- *Consult a lawyer if you think the charter school has violated your child's legal rights.* If you have tried to resolve the situation with the charter school administrator and the Board of Trustees, and you still think your child's rights are being violated, you may want to consult a lawyer.
- *Get a copy of the school's charter.* If the charter school won't give you a copy of the charter, you can get it from the School District of Philadelphia by calling (215) 299-4670. There will be a fee involved in getting a copy of the charter from the School District. The School District of Philadelphia will also schedule time for you to look at the school's charter if you call (215) 299-4670.
- The **charter** is the **actual written document** that is signed by the Philadelphia School District and the Board of Trustees of the charter school. The charter must include:
  - The mission and educational goals of the charter school;
  - The curriculum to be offered and the methods of testing whether students are meeting educational goals;
  - The school's governing structure, including how members of the Board of Trustees are selected;
  - How parents' complaints regarding the operation of the charter school will be reviewed;
  - The school's suspension and expulsion procedures; and
  - Opportunities for parent, student, teacher and community involvement and input.
- *Write a letter to the Philadelphia School District's School Reform Commission (SRC) setting out the problems you are having with the charter school.* Under the Charter School Law, the School Reform Commission has the authority to **revoke** the charter or **not renew** it if:
  - The charter school has violated any of the conditions, standards or procedures contained in the written charter;

- Students at the charter school don't do well on statewide assessments or on the performance standards the school put in the charter;
  - The school fails to meet generally accepted standards of fiscal management or audit requirements;
  - The school violates the Charter School Law;
  - The school violates other laws, including laws that protect children with disabilities; or
  - The charter school has been convicted of fraud.
- In your letter to the School District of Philadelphia's School Reform Commission, state your concerns briefly and concisely. Look at the school's charter to see if the school is violating a standard or procedure in its own charter, and point that out. State whether you think the school's charter should not be renewed, or should be revoked, and why.

➔ PLEASE KEEP IN MIND THAT THE SCHOOL REFORM COMMISSION PROBABLY WILL *NOT* TAKE SPECIFIC ACTION TO FIX YOUR CHILD'S PROBLEM – THE REASON FOR WRITING THE SRC IS TO LET IT KNOW WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE CHARTER SCHOOL.

- Parents in Philadelphia should send their letters to:

James Nevels, Chair  
 School Reform Commission  
 The School District of Philadelphia  
 21<sup>st</sup> Street and The Parkway  
 Philadelphia, PA 19103-1099

- The charter school must submit an annual report to the Philadelphia School Reform Commission and the Secretary of the PA Department of Education about whether the charter school is meeting the goals of the charter. *Ask the charter school for a copy of the year-end report, and provide your own written comments to the School Board about the progress of the charter school.*

☞ ***Only the Philadelphia School Reform Commission has the authority to revoke or not renew the charter. In Philadelphia, if the charter is not formally terminated by the School Reform Commission, the charter automatically renews every four (4) years.*** However, prior to granting a four-year renewal of the charter, the Reform Commission must conduct a comprehensive review of the charter school. Parents of children who attend charter schools need to keep the School Reform Commission informed about the operations of the charter school – both good and bad news!

- *Write a letter to the Pennsylvania Department of Education setting out your concerns with your charter school.* The Department of Education **does not** have the authority to revoke or not renew the charter – only the Philadelphia School Reform Commission can do that – but it is important that the Department of Education knows what is going on in charter schools. You can send your letter to:

Office of Educational Initiatives  
Pennsylvania Department of Education  
333 Market Street  
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

- For more information on charter schools in Philadelphia and throughout Pennsylvania, you can go to the following websites:

→ **[http://www.pde.state.pa.us/charter\\_schools/site/default.asp](http://www.pde.state.pa.us/charter_schools/site/default.asp)**: This is the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s website on charter schools. It contains a link to the Charter School Law, known as Act 22 of 1997, answers to frequently asked questions about Pennsylvania charter schools, and a list of names, addresses, and phone numbers for all the charter schools operating in Pennsylvania.

→ **[http://www.phila.k12.pa.us/schools/charters/charter\\_info.html](http://www.phila.k12.pa.us/schools/charters/charter_info.html)**: This is the School District of Philadelphia’s website. It has a list of frequently asked questions and answers, and a directory of Philadelphia charter school addresses and phone numbers.

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