

The Best Defense Is a Good Offense

Failure to plan ahead can mean accelerated growth of charter schools in your district. What five planning flaws can you fix to prevent your district from losing public support?

People tire of public school issues that reflect contemporary societal problems or poor management—or both. Nothing, with the exception of school violence, upsets parents more than repeated redistricting due to demographics or overcrowding.

Charter schools have become a popular alternative over the past two decades, endorsed by President Obama and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan as an innovative and viable way to boost student achievement and get children out of low-performing traditional public schools. And while there have been success stories, just as there are in traditional public schools, charters also can present real problems for school boards and districts that are struggling to make ends meet.

Typically, state charter school legislation allows the diversion of local school tax money without oversight by the local school board. Some charters are under district oversight, but the general aim is for separate management both at the local and state levels. Recently, the Georgia Supreme Court held that having a state commission devoted to these schools violated the state constitution, enraging charter interests.

Charters do not have to take all comers, are not redistricted as demographics shift, can ease out poor learners, and can manage themselves or hire a private firm. The result can be using tax money to escape from support for operating the local public school district.

In South Carolina, for example, legislation provided that a charter's racial makeup should reflect the district or the "targeted" area. What public school district gets to "target" the area it will serve, given what that can mean in terms of racial and socioeconomic balance?

Charter schools can, despite claims of racial impartiality, with few exceptions serve mostly white students. This leaves most minority kids in regular public schools, just like faith-based academies have done for years. Charters use public tax money to run operations that traditional public schools lawfully cannot do because they must serve all who come, regardless

Kelley D. Carey

of race, wealth, or neighborhood.

How can traditional schools slow this trend? As someone who has worked for more than 35 years as a school planning consultant to local, state, and federal governments, I believe the answer is simple, even if the issues are not.

It comes down to this: Demographics, facilities, and program concerns are never static, but if you don't have a proper plan to address them, you will have problems.

Common flaws in planning

What are the flaws in public schools planning that can feed this trend? Here are five:

■ **You don't have a comprehensive long-range plan for programs, demographics, and facilities.** A five-year plan often is limited to preconceived notions of new buildings here and there as well as random repairs and additions. It's easy to see why parents get fed up with yearly redistricting and changes in curriculum, grade structures, and programs that come and go.

With rare exceptions, "progressive" student assignment plans use aging buildings to underpin a grand plan—without a long-range vision for abandoning those facilities and putting new schools in racially and economically neutral locations over time. At heart, much redistricting and construction is driven by existing old schools. Arguments about closing schools to meet declining budgets highlight the lack of ongoing planning.

Planning is not using trial and error or one-shot changes, but is an ongoing process driven by good management and fundamental fairness. It should not embrace this week's gimmicks or promises by itinerant experts with no vested interest in outcomes.

■ **You don't have strong succession plans in place.** When a dynamic superintendent moves on, often no internal candidate is ready to move up, meaning that you have to go outside the district—and often outside the state—to find a successor. Unless the new superintendent is willing to continue in his predecessor's footsteps, this lack of continuity, or churn, in leadership can derail plans that are in place and prevent you from moving forward.

■ **Your board does not properly involve parents.** Are parents of school-age children on your board? Are meetings long and frequent, so that no working person can afford to serve? Does the board micromanage? Are parents actively involved in ongoing long-range planning for facilities, programs, and student assignment? Parents should not call the shots, but they should have a voice in the process so they can see that final decisions were informed, sound, and objective.

Public participation in data-driven planning leads to informed decisions and does not usurp the board's role. Parents get some of that involvement in charter schools. In public schools, parental involvement more often consists of "This meeting is to explain the plan that we will follow going forward. The district welcomes your comments and questions." That is not hearing the public voice.

■ **Your board has members whose goal is to protect a particular area of the district, keeping schools that should be closed and overbuilding in other places.** In one recent case of severe overcapacity in a district, members from the declining area all voted against an old school closure that had to happen. They were posturing for votes, knowing the majority had to vote for closing.

■ **Schools are built mostly in "growth" areas, leaving older buildings, which are often in low-income neighborhoods, behind.** Economic segregation is as dangerous as racial divides. What documented processes drive new school locations? Do you have a phase-out plan for old buildings that can't support current programs and are black holes sucking up maintenance funds?

Many charter advocates cite their frustration with redistricting, leadership churn, and the lack of evident planning as reasons for starting their own schools. They want their children in classrooms where parents with similar backgrounds share their values. One challenge for traditional school districts is engaging these parents so that they support the work you are doing.

Commit to a rolling, realistic plan

In my opinion, the emerging charter school business is largely pressed by white parents and for-profit companies. The effect is that charters make equal education that much harder by removing part of the tax base from traditional public schools and changing the need for existing school buildings.

Privately operated charter schools are a much more effective tool for racial and economic segregation than the old segregated school zones, simply because they are not as obviously publicly sponsored discrimination. By contrast, district-supervised charters may well serve targeted areas such as low-income housing projects and by offering enrichment programs similar to magnets.

We cannot improve traditional public education by slicing the funding pie, with a chunk going to parents who have no interest in supporting it and a desire to use tax money to invent their own programs in locations that further divide communi-

ties along racial and economic lines. At the same time, the notion of, "Do it my way, or I am starting my own school"—however self-seeking—may have some root in the desire for better schools management.

Traditional public schools are full of innovation; some feel there's too much of it. Districts are always trying new programs to keep kids interested who would rather be somewhere else, or they focus on the latest teaching gimmicks without emphasizing the life skills and market realities graduates will face.

Boards should commit to a rolling five-year planning process, instead of changing grade structures and repeatedly redistricting to handle enrollment changes that were foreseeable. Trying the latest program models, without a context of a five-year plan, just begs for the loss of public support.

The planning must include programs, demographics, and facilities. It must be updated each year. No five-year plan is good for five years. We cannot get public support with a business model that only plans when things have gotten out of hand.

Parents leaving for charter schools are not all anti-public education, anti-social, or driven by religion. They do want attendance stability, relevant education, less politics and board infighting, and more beneficial programs development instead of change for the sake of change. They want less uncertainty from poor planning. But, doesn't meeting such concerns reflect a well-run school district anyway?

Boards must learn to compete for the future of education. We still design buildings for old technologies, such as media centers, while the world is wireless, and build traditional classrooms with desks lined up. We plan around worn-out schools without long-range vision. We buy textbooks when kids are keyed to interaction and information exchange via the Internet, tablets, and cell phones. As Buckminster Fuller noted long ago about urban planning, we also need security, identity, and opportunity in public schools.

This year, Memphis rejected 21 new charter school applications, citing the huge, sudden budget impact upon schools left behind, and despite pressure from above to do it anyway. Would such a huge financial loss without a planned transition represent responsible planning? Does transferring public taxes to private vendors help all children to not be left behind—or just a select few who would do well anyway?

In the end, we must rise to the privately run and for-profit charter school competition by doing a better job of planning and securing public involvement. Public schools are the centers for educational opportunity for all kids regardless of their color, capabilities, or test results. ■

Kelley D. Carey, a frequent contributor to *ASBJ*, has been a school planning consultant for more than 35 years. Based in Hilton Head, S.C., he is the author of *School District Master Planning—A Practical Guide to Demographics & Facilities Planning*, published by Rowman & Littlefield.