

"Federation Corner" column
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Civic Federation to host program on charter schools

by Paula Bienenfeld
Chair, MCCF Education Committee

The program at the June 13 meeting of the Civic Federation will give us the chance to learn about Maryland's Charter School Act and to begin a conversation about charter schools in Montgomery County. We will cover what the Act is; what it allows and doesn't allow; what charter schools offer and what they don't offer; and to have a first discussion on facts and break some logjams.

Our distinguished panelists will include members of three organizations directly related to charter schools and the charter school process in the area: David Borinsky, of the Maryland Charter School Network; Joseph Hawkins, of the Global Garden Public Charter School; and Dr. Darren Woodruff of the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board.

David Borinsky chairs the Board of the Maryland Charter School Network (MCSN). MCSN is a non-profit, non-partisan, statewide organization whose aim is to promote and serve the Maryland charter school movement. MCSN offers advice, training, information and support to charter schools and charter school applicants.

Joseph Hawkins has been involved in charter schools in Montgomery County since at least 1999, with the application of the Jaime Escalante Charter School, the first charter school application in the county, and more recently with the application to the Montgomery County Board of Education (BOE) of the Global Garden Public Charter School.

Dr. Darren Woodruff is a Board Member of the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (PCSB). The PCSB was created in 1996 by an amendment to the D. C. School Reform Act of 1995 as a second, independent authorizer of public charter schools. In 2006, the D.C. Board of Education, which had served as the first charter authorizer since 1996, voted to relinquish its authorizing responsibilities. The D.C. Council passed legislation in 2007 to give the Mayor direct authority over the traditional public school system, and to transfer the oversight responsibility for the charter schools previously authorized by the DC BOE to the PCSB. The PCSB became the sole authorizer of charter schools in the District of Columbia.

The PCSB regularly evaluates D. C. public charter schools for academic results, compliance with applicable local and federal laws and fiscal management, and holds them accountable for results. The PCSB can close charter schools in the District of Columbia that fail to meet the goals established in the charter agreement between the PCSB and the school.

The Maryland Public Charter School Act was passed and signed into law in May 2003. The State Law:

1. allows new start up schools and existing public schools to become charter schools;
2. does not limit the number of charter schools for the state or any LEA (Local Educational Agency);
3. identifies the local board of education as the primary authorizer of charter schools;
4. identifies the State Board of Education to serve as a secondary authorizer as a result of an appeal decision or for a restructured school;
5. requires that charter schools receive funding that is commensurate to funding received by other public schools;
6. gives charter schools a right to appeal decisions made by local boards of education;
7. requires that charter school employees are public school employees of the local school board; and,

8. requires that local school boards adopt a charter school policy.

There are currently 44 public charter schools in Maryland, but none in Montgomery County. Perhaps our program panelists can shed some light on what may have thwarted past attempts to have charter schools authorized in the County, and what the likelihood is of any being established in the County in the near future. The program will last approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. The initial informational portion of the program will be followed by a question-and-answer period during which attendees may question the panelists on aspects of the charter school issue.

The June 13 MCCF meeting will begin at 7:45 p.m. and will be held in the first floor auditorium of the County Council Building, located at 100 Maryland Avenue in Rockville. After 7 p.m. free parking is available on the bottom level of the multi-level garage behind the Council Building, accessible via the driveway entrances at the corner of Monroe Street and E. Jefferson Street (Route 28). To access the first floor auditorium use the entrance nearest the garage--the one with automatic sliding doors--just off the driveway at the rear of the building.

As always, the public is invited and encouraged to attend meetings of the Civic Federation. Join us on June 13 and let's begin the conversation about charter schools in Montgomery County.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-100 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net