

Funding, timelines and disclosure policies are topics of second public meeting

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The Charter School Commission gathered for its second official meeting in Bellevue at the end of April. The commission held executive elections, considered several bylaws, and reviewed its future budget options. The National Association of Charter School Authorizers gave a presentation to the commission, and the meeting closed with a heated discussion about the commission's protocol for transparency and public disclosure.

One thing became clear very fast at the recent meeting: the implementation of charter schools in Washington, and the development of the commission itself, are both going to have some serious growing pains.

The nine-member commission is tasked with managing and overseeing the new charter school system. In its first stages, the commission is both establishing charter schools in the state and completing the groundwork for the Charter School Commission itself.

Steve Sundquist, director of the Seattle School Board, will chair the commission, while managing director of the Bellevue Arts Museum Larry Wright will serve as vice chair. Dr. Doreen Cato, executive director and chief professional officer at United Way of Grays Harbor County, was elected as the executive committee's at-large member.

The new state commission seems to be building a plane in mid-flight. Its members are setting the commission's protocol, while attempting to complete several important and time-sensitive tasks. This includes the hiring of an executive director. So far much of the commission's formative work has been completed during small group ad hoc committees, which report their results at the public meetings.

During public comment at the last meeting, John Donaghy of the Washington Education Association highlighted one potential problem of the commission's rushed schedule. Donaghy expressed concern that the current pace of the process to approve charter schools and authorizers will encourage speed above all else. There are eight open charter school slots for the first round of selection, and they will be filled first come first served.

In terms of a budget, the commission is still working with ballpark figures to determine future administrative funding. It won't know the state's contribution until a budget is finalized by the legislature, and it's still negotiating with the State Board of Education to decide the percentage of each charter school's annual funding that will be charged as authorizer oversight fees.

Commission members are directing this process without compensation, alongside full-time jobs. Shortages in support staff, time, and funding are likewise contributing to some predictable outcomes.



In order to meet its deadlines, the commission is looking for quality short cuts wherever it can find them. A major line of support is being extended by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA).

William Haft, NACSA's Vice President for Authorizer Development, gave a presentation at last month's meeting that reviewed the charter school authorization process. Commission members made it clear that they would be relying heavily on NACSA's expertise and guidance to get started. This will likely include the use of various NACSA frameworks for items like the description and application documents for the commission's executive director position.

Reliance on NACSA support may be a forgone conclusion, and necessary for the commission to meet its pressing deadlines, but NACSA's prominent position in the commission's development will also grant it extraordinary access to the implementation of charter schools in Washington. NACSA funds part of its own operating costs through member dues, but the organization relies primarily on other private funding sources, along with federal grants and direct contracts. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recently asked NACSA to submit a grant proposal, and the Walton Family Foundation has also expressed interest.

All things considered, the commission is actively trying to be, and to appear to be, as transparent as possible. Near the end of this most recent meeting, the commission deliberated and ultimately declined an invitation from several charter organizations in Colorado, who offered to bring commission members to Denver to tour and meet several charter affiliates.

A lively discussion followed where commission members debated the adoption of disclosure policies for charter school visitations. Several commission members argued that any visit to a charter school should be disclosed, and members should recuse themselves from an authorization decision if an organization they visited applies to the commission in the future. The disclosure agreement was hotly debated, but ultimately tabled and put on the May meeting agenda.

The issue may well prove to be one of the most important in terms of public perception of the commission's work. However, it is in a long line of other pressing issues that will be addressed at the upcoming meeting. One change that might make transparency easier came from a suggestion during public comment, to broadcast the commission meetings via TVW.

No matter what, the commission members have their work cut out for them.

The next meeting of the Charter School Commission is scheduled for 10:00 a.m., Tuesday, May 28, at the TAF Academy in Seattle.