

CHERRY HILL PUBLIC SCHOOL
Cherry Hill, New Jersey

Frequently Asked Questions about Charter Schools

What is a charter school?

A charter school is a **publicly funded school that operates independently of the local public school district** and has control over its own staff, curriculum, and budget.

How is a charter school funded?

Charter schools are funded with local tax dollars—**YOUR** tax dollars. The NJDOE will notify the district in early 2012 of the amount that the school district must reserve from the 2012-13 budget for use by the charter school during the next school year.

Preliminary guidance to Cherry Hill from the NJDOE indicates that we will have to set aside nearly \$1.9 million for a projected 169 students in 2012-2013.¹ The enrollment projection of 169 students is simply a percentage of actual district enrollments (i.e., it does not reflect a survey of Cherry Hill families to ascertain interest in enrolling in the charter school).

Funding is supposed to follow the student. Won't the district be able to reduce its own costs by an amount similar to what we would send to the charter school?

Because students who enroll in the charter school are not likely to come from a single school or grade level from our district, we can't simply close a school or close a classroom; rather, we will have to reduce the number of teachers and raise class sizes across the district to make up for the transfer of funding. Based on initial projections, our district could be faced with having to cut about 29 teachers to meet the funding obligation for a charter school that simply isn't warranted in our community.

What if the enrollments don't materialize? Does the money come back to the local school district?

The district will receive a payment schedule based on the projected enrollment as of February 2012 – about six months before the school is scheduled to open. If the enrollments are below projected numbers when the school opens, the payment schedule will be adjusted. At that point, however, the damage to our 2012-2013 budget will have been done. It might be too late to reinstate teachers; any funds that revert back to the district would likely have to be used in the following budget year.

Once the school year begins, the district will request the names and addresses of all of the students who claim residency in Cherry Hill so we can confirm that any students we are paying for are, in fact, Cherry Hill students. (The cost for any residency investigations required by this process would be borne by the district.)

Who approves charter school applications? Do local Boards of Education or taxpayers have a say?

No! New Jersey's charter school law gives the NJ Department of Education absolute authority over the approval process. According to the Education Law Center: "NJDOE uses individuals from outside the Department, some of whom publicly support, work or have worked for charter schools, to conduct the initial review of new charter

¹ Letter from Yut'se Thomas, Office of School Funding, NJ Department of Education, to Dr. David Campbell, "2011-12 New Charter School Applications – March 2011 Application, Potential Charter School Aid," May 5, 2011.

applications. However, NJDOE has staunchly resisted releasing the names and qualifications of these ‘outside reviewers’ to the public, prompting two lawsuits, one by the ACLU-NJ on behalf of Education Law Center, and the other by NJ State Senator Nia Gill.”

Local districts and Boards of Education have no role in the process, although they can submit letters detailing their opposition to a charter school application. All of the sending districts identified in the application of the Regis Academy Charter School (Cherry Hill, Voorhees, Lawnside, and Somerdale) filed letters objecting to the charter school application.

The lack of local control in charter school authorization is unique to our state. Across the US, about 90% of all authorizers for charter schools are local school districts.² According to a Rutgers-Eagleton poll conducted in June 2011, New Jersey residents overwhelmingly support requiring voter approval before new charter schools are approved.

In June 2011, the NJ Assembly overwhelmingly approved a bill that would require local approval for the establishment of new charter schools. A3852/S2243 was referred to Senate Education Committee in July.

Can the district determine the reasons why the NJDOE approved the charter school application?

No. The NJDOE does not publicly release its reviews of charter applications and has even denied requests made under the NJ Open Public Records law. (It will, however, provide guidance to charter schools when an application is rejected so they can better prepare for a future application.)

Is the school district appealing the authorization of the Regis Academy Charter School?

Yes, in special action on October 11, the Board of Education approved a resolution to file an appeal with the Commissioner of Education.

What should Cherry Hill residents and taxpayers do?

Contact Acting Commissioner of Education Christopher Cerf and ask him to reconsider the DOE’s approval of the charter school. Here is his contact information:

Christopher Cerf
Acting Commissioner
NJ Department of Education
P.O. Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625-0500

You can also email the Commissioner at <http://www.state.nj.us/education/parents/contact.htm>

Then, let State Senator Jim Beach, Senate President Sweeney, the Senate Education Committee know that CHERRY HILL should decide if a new charter school will open in our community. Sign the petition at: <http://www.change.org/petitions/new-jersey-communities-want-local-control-over-new-charter-schools-2>

Each signature generates a letter to Senate President Sweeney and the Senate Education Committee.

² Shen, Yilan. Charter Schools in the States: Authorizing Charter Schools. Denver, CO: National Conference of State Legislatures, May 2011.

You can also contact Sen. Sweeney, Sen. Beach, and members of the Senate Education Committee by phone to urge their support for S2243, which requires local approval before the establishment of a new charter school, and S3005, which improves charter school financial and educational transparency and accountability and helps ensure that charter school students represent their sending districts in terms of income, English proficiency, and special needs. (See links to the legislation below; the Assembly overwhelmingly passed identical versions of these bills in June.)

Senator Jim Beach: (856) 429-1572

Senate President Steve Sweeney: (856) 251-9801

Senate Education Committee

Senator M. Teresa Ruiz, Chair: (973) 484-1000

Senator Jim Whelan, Vice Chair: (609) 383-1388

Senator Diane Allen: (609) 239-2800

Senator Thomas Kean Jr.: (908) 232-3673

Senator Shirley Turner: (609) 530-3277