



Pastors for Texas Children

January 22, 2021

Dear Assistant Secretary:

I wish to comment on the Dissemination Grants Program proposed priorities, a program authorized to make awards on a competitive basis to support efforts by eligible entities to support the charter school sector and increase the number of charter schools consistent with the authority in section 4305(a)(3)(B) of the Elementary and Secondary Education of 1965, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA).

As the Founder and Executive Director of Pastors for Texas Children and the organizer of networks of Pastors and faith leaders in eight states, I work throughout the United States to improve education opportunities for all children. But over the last five years, I have become greatly concerned about the proliferation of charter schools within our country that operate without the transparency and accountability that we expect of our traditional public schools.

While the intended purposes of this program may be noble, I am witnessing firsthand that charter schools do not live up to the intended purposes of the program, and in fact, create a dual education system that drains public funds from public schools that serve *all* students. For example, charter schools often enact policies and practices that do not make educational opportunities available to all students. In Texas, charter schools are allowed to exclude any student with a discipline history from enrollment in the charter which research has shown discriminates specifically against children of color and students with special needs who have disproportionate percentages of discipline issues.

In addition, existing charter schools in Texas are allowed to expand through a simple administrative process without any notice to the general public, any public hearing, and without posting the expansion requests on any public website. The only way some neighborhoods have become aware a charter plans to open a new campus is when construction starts.

Finally, we have documented charter schools that are allowed to expand even though they serve only 2.1 percent of students with special needs, significantly below the state average in Texas of 10.5 percent. Clearly, charters that significantly underserve students with special needs should not be rewarded by allowing them to expand, and in fact, the Department should investigate the practices of such charters.

I ask that the Department take a pause in funding the expansion of charter schools through this program until there is a review of practices and policies such as these that raise serious issues about education equity for our most vulnerable children and practices that ensure authentic public participation. We need to reset what the priorities of federal funding should be based on shared community values, actual outcomes, and hard data.

Specifically, we ask the Department to:

- Delete funding for “facilities practices”;

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- Focus priority one and two to provide best practices on how charter operators can increase public input and participation; examples of public governance of charter schools; and how states are beginning to document the true fiscal impact of charter schools on public education;
- Revise priority number three to address an increase in the reporting and accountability of how charters serve certain student populations such as students with special needs; and
- Evaluate the Charter Schools Program to determine how funds have been used by charters that failed to open or closed.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Yours cordially,

Rev. Charles Foster Johnson  
Founder and Executive Director, Pastors for Texas Children