



Mississippi First created this document in 2012 (and updated in 2013) to address the ongoing charter school debate in Mississippi.

Common Concerns about Charter Schools

Mississippi's charter school debate, which has been very contentious for several years, has recently intensified due to the increased likelihood that a more robust charter bill will soon become law. The debate is deeply rooted in differences surrounding education policy and generations of racial and partisan politics. Throughout the process of crafting our state's charter school policy, many Mississippians have raised important concerns related to the purpose of charter schools, their academic success, and the impact these schools could have on our entire public education system. This document will offer our position on each of these concerns, and how they are addressed by both the House and Senate charter bills.

Common Concerns

Concern #1: Will charter schools allow private schools to receive public funds?

One of the strongest concerns voiced throughout the history of Mississippi's charter school debate has been that private academies will financially benefit from charter school legislation. Critics fear that academies may either be converted into charters or that newly formed charter schools will cater to current private school students. These critics point to Mississippi's history of desegregation, which is filled with stories of public funds being used to preserve segregated schooling, as evidence of the validity of this concern.

OUR POSITION

Mississippi First supports charter schools as a tool to increase academic achievement and close achievement gaps in places where schools and districts are not serving all students well, especially at-risk students. We strongly oppose any attempts to use charter school legislation as a way to turn back the clock on Brown v. Board of Education.

HOW THE 2012 CHARTER SCHOOL BILLS ADDRESS THIS CONCERN

- Both HB888 and SB2401 include *specific language prohibiting current private schools from converting* to charter schools.
- Furthermore, the bills each require a rigorous authorization process by which charter applicants must provide a detailed school design proposal that covers an extensive list of school quality items such as curriculum, budget, school leadership, governance, and academic goals. Through such a process, not only can applications to establish white-flight charter schools be exposed and soundly rejected, but well-intentioned, high-quality school proposals can be identified and approved.

Concern #2: Will charter school teachers be qualified?

Teacher quality is critical to raising student achievement. Several media outlets have reported that charter legislation under consideration exempts some or all teachers from having state licensure. Legislators have raised concerns about whether this will allow charter schools to hire unqualified people to teach in classrooms supported with state tax dollars.

OUR POSITION [Updated: 3/15/2013]

Mississippi First agrees that teacher quality is one of the most important ingredients in high-quality schooling for every child, and we have the utmost respect for how much skill it takes to be a great teacher in Mississippi's challenging public school environment. However, [teacher quality research](#) tells us that many traditional "inputs" (years of experience, certification, or advanced degrees) have little or no relationship to student achievement. Therefore, Mississippi needs to re-think the way we recruit, train, retain, and evaluate teachers to raise the bar in one of America's most important professions. Since certification does not actually mean that teachers will be effective, we must also develop new ways of certifying teachers, including demonstrated effectiveness.

Our charter law should strike a balance between allowing every great candidate to teach regardless of certification, while also holding a reasonable minimum bar for qualifications. The federal requirement that all public school teachers be highly qualified is the right entry requirement for charter school teachers. Being "highly qualified" means that all charter teachers must have a bachelor's degree and demonstrated competence in the field in which they are teaching. Demonstrated competence is typically shown by passing the Praxis I test and one or more of the subject-area PraxisII tests. For state certification, teachers must take these tests and successfully complete an approved teacher preparation program such as through a college or university or approved alternate route.

Furthermore, the accountability charter schools will face serves as a very, very strong incentive to hire the very best people to teach in their schools. Many of these people will undoubtedly be certified in Mississippi or some other state. Others may have passed the Praxis I and II but do not hold any certification. By exempting some charter school teachers from state certification, we enable charter schools to explore new, innovative ways of identifying the individuals most qualified to teach and to support them as they enter the profession. This is one of the most important avenues for innovation in charter schools that we can learn from and then expand to the entire public school system.

[Update: A link to a Brookings Institute study on teacher quality, *Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job (2006)* has been added in the text]

HOW THE 2012 CHARTER SCHOOL BILLS ADDRESS THIS CONCERN

- Both HB888 and SB 2401 **require all charter school teachers to be highly qualified** under federal law.
- SB2401 further **requires 50% of teachers in charter schools to hold state certifications.**
- HB888 **grants all teachers exemption.**

Concern #3: How can we afford to build more facilities and hire more administrators for public charter schools when our districts are already underfunded?

In addition to fears about the general budgetary impact of public charter schools, some individuals argue that Mississippi can't afford to build and maintain more facilities and hire more administrators when school districts are cash-strapped. They have accused public charter school supporters of wanting a parallel school system, duplicating all of the exact same costs of the current system.

OUR POSITION

I. Facilities

Mississippi First agrees that our state does not have the funding for dozens of new school buildings, as evidenced by the fact that Mississippi has transferred money out of the state's school building fund to balance the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) for the past several years.

Public charter schools rarely build new facilities (especially when they first open) because they usually do not receive facilities funds from state or local governments. Finding an appropriate facility for a public charter school is such a challenge that it prevents some charter applicants from being approved (or even applying).

Here's how most public charter schools find their facilities:

- **Conversion public charter schools**, which are traditional public schools that convert into public charter schools, typically remain in their existing buildings. They sometimes pay rent to school districts (which usually still own the buildings) for use of the space.
- **Start-up public charter schools** have to find space for their school prior to opening. Because public charter schools do not receive facilities funds from state or local governments to construct new buildings, they usually locate in existing space. Start-up public charter schools sometimes lease vacant space in current public schools that are either under-enrolled or have been closed, or they lease space from other vacant buildings. In some cases, public charter schools can eventually purchase a building (whether a school district building or other property) that they have been leasing for several years, using money the school has saved or raised through private or other sources. On rare occasions, some start-up public charter schools have been able to save and raise enough funds to build facilities.

II. Administrators

Mississippi First believes that all schools, including public charter schools, must make smart choices about how dollars are allocated between administrative costs and instructional costs. Public charter schools, in particular, have to produce excellence on a tight budget that often does not include many administrators or non-instructional staff.

HOW 2012 CHARTER SCHOOL BILLS ADDRESS THIS CONCERN

I. Facilities

- **Neither HB888 nor SB2401 provides additional funds for public charter school buildings.**
- SB2401 includes no state or local money for facilities.
- HB888 grants public charter schools **permission to access existing state facilities program money just like every other public school if the legislature appropriates dollars to this program again.**

However, in the near future, the state building fund is unlikely to receive any appropriation. Further, like SB2401, HB888 does not allow local money raised for facilities through public bond issues to be transferred to a public charter school.

- In both HB888 and SB2401, **all public charter schools must provide “a sound facilities plan”** as part of their applications for authorization. Because both HB888 and SB2401 do not provide for any money to flow to public charter schools before the first day of school, public charter schools will not be able to build facilities unless they receive dollars from private or other sources to do so. This approach reduces the number of schools that are likely to open and limits those schools to only the most serious applicants. It also reduces the likelihood that public charter school operators will attempt to build new buildings upon opening.
- Unlike traditional public schools, **public charter schools cannot pass resolutions to ask the electorate to approve local bonds (bond issues)** in order to build new facilities. Again, this reality will make it highly unlikely that public charter schools will build new facilities with any state or local dollars, if at all.

II. Administrators

- Any way you read either of the bills, **public charter schools will have access to less money than traditional public schools.** For example, SB2401 states that public charter schools will get only a portion of local tax dollars per-pupil and will not receive access to facilities programs. Furthermore, public charter schools cannot ask the Board of Supervisors or City Council for tax increases to fill budget holes. As a result, public charter schools will have to be more efficient while also meeting their annual student performance targets.
- Both **HB888 and SB2401 require public charter school applicants to describe their staffing and budget prior to authorization.** This requirement will enable the authorizer to understand a public charter school applicant’s plan for administrative costs before approving the application. Applicants with excessive projected administrative costs will be rejected.

Concern #4: Will charter schools exacerbate the low achievement of some district schools by drawing away the highest-performing students and the most-involved parents?

Some have argued that charter schools will enroll the best students with the most involved parents and leave the traditional school to contend with the remaining underperforming students and disinterested parents, which will cause the traditional schools to experience deeper declines in achievement. These individuals may also argue that high-performing charters can attribute their results to this “creaming” effect or to pushing out low-achieving kids once they are enrolled and not to superior education.

OUR POSITION

Mississippi First does not support any policy which would make charter schools available only to an “elite” group of students. Charter schools, like traditional public schools, cannot discriminate based on race, religion, disability, economic status, or other federally protected demographics. Furthermore, unlike magnet schools (which some of Mississippi’s current school districts have), charters cannot impose tests for admission, including auditions: in other words, charter schools cannot screen in any way for high-achieving students, students with enhanced athletic ability, or students with other special skills.

Not only must charters follow non-discrimination laws, national studies show that charter schools do not take the cream of the crop from neighboring traditional schools. In fact, studies show the opposite: students transferring to charter schools tend to have test scores that are at or below their traditional school peers, on average. These findings show us that charter schools are reaching students who are not being well-served by their traditional schools, rather than the “best” students as high-performing schools fear.

Furthermore, several researchers have investigated the question of whether charter schools have a positive or negative impact on nearby traditional public schools from which they draw students. While the studies conflict as to whether or not the presence of charter schools increases achievement at traditional schools, it is clear that the introduction of charter schools in a community does not harm student achievement at traditional schools. For example, a [2009 RAND study](#) on charter schools in eight states found that charters had no effect on the achievement of students at nearby traditional public schools. This evidence shows us that fears that the mere existence of charters will harm the achievement of traditional schools are unfounded.

HOW THE BILLS ADDRESS THESE CONCERNS

- Both **HB888** and **SB2401** have several provisions preventing non-discrimination and banning admission tests of any type. For example, the bills bind charter schools to all federal civil rights laws and specifically ban discrimination based on “race, creed, color, sex, disability or national origin or any other category that would be unlawful if done by a noncharter public school” as well as “minority status or limited proficiency in English.” Furthermore, both bills specifically prohibit charter schools from “limit[ing] admission based on ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, income level, disabling condition, proficiency in the English language or academic or athletic ability.”
- Both **HB888** and **SB2401** require charter schools’ enrollment to reflect the at-risk population of the surrounding traditional school district, within a 25% variance. (Note: A charter school’s at-risk population may vary no more than 25%, not 25 percentage points, from the population, which means that if the at-risk population of the surrounding district were 10%, the charter school’s at-risk population may be no less than 7.5%.)

- Both **HB888** and **SB2401** require charter schools to report specific data annually. Two of the required indicators are **expulsion rates** (the number and percent of students expelled annually) and **recurrent enrollment** (the number and percent of students) who return to the charter school from one year to the next. Both of these data points will then be compared to traditional public schools with comparable student demographics. With this information, the public can determine whether charter school's attrition rate--the number of students who do not return to the school--is reasonable and indicative of fair practices at the school.