

To the Cooperative School Board at its 10/16/07 Meeting:

The Cooperative Board needs independent advice regarding the two charter schools launched by the Coop:

By way of history, the Great Bay e-learning Charter School was set up within our district. It is a middle/high school, and there are Coop Board representatives on their Board of Trustees, their staff is hired by our administrators, and their budget is part of our budget.

Coop Board and PP&C Subcommittee minutes from 2005 indicate that board members supporting the notion of a virtual high school believed that the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School would be set up in a similar manner.

Those same minutes also indicate that the Coop had the potential ability to offset Coop expenses from the Virtual School by selling courses or enrolling students from outside the district.

Fast-forward to the fall of 2007, when some Coop Board members learn in the newspaper that VLACS is a completely separate entity with no ties whatsoever to the Coop -- other than the fact that 4 of our top administrators have spent a lot of time and resources setting it up and are now poised to lead it.

As many questions as I have about the evolution of the charter schools over the past few years, even more questions remain about the future, compounding the need for independent analysis and advice:

If the Virtual School is a "separate entity", why was it allowed to set up a teacher-recruiting booth at Exeter High School during the teacher in-service day two weeks ago? We do not allow other independent schools to set up shop recruiting our teachers on school grounds! Once again, the Virtual School is acting like a part of our school district, not a separate business. The lines keep being crossed...

Intellectual property issues begin to surface, too. EHS teachers have observed that the Virtual Charter School course catalogue looks strikingly similar to the EHS curriculum. Our EHS curriculum has been carefully developed over many years with great care by our Cooperative staff. This material belongs to the Cooperative District, and should not be used by an independent entity without due compensation.

These are only some of the questions that spring to mind about the two charter schools launched by SAU 16. One is still a part of our public school system, while the other apparently is not, but in many ways still acts like it is. As volunteer school board members, you have limited time to learn and understand how these schools evolved, and perhaps more importantly, what the multi-faceted implications are for the future of the Coop District.

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By hiring an independent advisor, Cooperative Board members would:

1. Essentially set this issue aside, allowing an unbiased third party to study the situation and advise you relative to the appropriate statutes pertaining to charter schools. You could better focus on more important issues directly related to our children's education in the coming months, rather than on these other issues of significant concern.
2. Remove personality conflict and emotion from the discussion, and alleviate interpersonal tension. As a community, let's prevent this from festering. An independent party can alleviate that.
3. Demonstrate to our new Superintendent applicants that when encountering an area of complexity or controversy, you will act in a professional manner by consulting an unbiased third party.

I urge all members of this board to recognize the fact that we are in uncharted waters with these charter schools, and that we need help making a map for the benefit of all parties. I urge you to hire someone independent to advise you on the complexities of the two charter schools, and on the financial impacts to taxpayers. All stakeholders would be relieved to hear of this judicious action by the Board.

Thank You,

Nathan Merrill
Stratham