Memorandum

To: Umbrella Action

From: The Center for Education Reform

Date: March 28, 2002

Issue: National Charter School Evaluation

Problem Statement

Thirty-seven states have unique charter school legislation. Federal legislation has recently granted the Secretary of Education more power to allocate increased financial assistance to state educational agencies (SEAs) for the authorization, implementation, and maintenance of charter schools. Assessment, however, remains one of the most variable components of such legislation. Evaluation methods are often ambiguous to both state and local education agencies (LEAs). In addition, diverse policies make it nearly impossible to draw accurate conclusions about the status or progress of charter schools as a national educational reform. The National Education Association reports that, “systems for accountability in charters have been inconsistent and ill-defined.” Many non-profit and government agencies have similar concerns and study charter school data with little consistency. It is necessary to take a new approach to evaluating charter schools and the Center for Education Reform is prepared to be aggressive in this approach.

Proposed Solution

There are currently no public policy proposals to address this problem. Three alternatives should be considered. One means to ameliorate the problem is to create a governing body to create a set of assessment guidelines that all state charter school legislation will include. Another solution is to stop trying to evaluate and report national charter school data. Finally, creating an all-encompassing federal charter school law would be another way to improve assessment.

The Center for Education Reform requests your support in advocating for a regulatory board within the United States Department of Education to be established for the annual assessment of charter schools. This body, The Council for Charter School Evaluation, will create basic standards which SEAs and LEAs must require of all charter schools. These standards will be used to compare and assess schools across the nation, determine their success and progress, and measure the impact charters have on participating individuals and groups. The U.S. Department of Education needs one year of planning before the council is ready for operation, necessitating the immediate adoption of this policy. The implementation of this policy initially requires the following actions.

The United States Department of Education must allocate at least 1% of President Bush’s proposed $56.5 billion education budget for 2003 to establish this council. President Bush and Secretary of Education Roderick Paige must select members of the council after member characteristics and requirements are determined. The council members must spend time examining current charter school data and state legislation, listening to experts on continuous improvement and assessment, and determining standard criteria and evaluation processes.
Cost/Benefit Analysis

The benefits of this policy are substantial. Charter school authorizers will initially know how, when and by what measures their school will be assessed and compared. Failing charter schools will not be permitted to stay open. Non-profit organizations and government agencies will be able to make more accurate conclusions from data the counsel provides. Charter schools will also be taken more seriously as national education reform. Finally, students, parents, educators and communities will be able to more secure in their investment in charter schools.

Our policy, however, is not without costs. Money allocated from the education budget will reduce financial assistance to other programs. There will be more work for pre-existing charters to meet the new standards. Our proposed policy is more politically feasible than the alternatives because it is less extreme and charter schools receive much bipartisan support. However, our innovative recommendation illustrates the conflicted argument between more or less government involvement in American institutions. The political debate will be a cost to the policy because there will be less support than opposition. Establishing the Counsel for Charter School Evaluation is a very effective way to improve the way charter schools are assessed. We will, however, need the support of Umbrella Action in order to get this policy onto the mainstream table of educational reform debate.