

Bias Against Black Charter Schools: School District of Philadelphia Under National Scrutiny Over Allegations

Philadelphia School District faces bias probe; City Council to hold hearings, African American Charter School Coalition demands reforms

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-- The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) has found itself under intense scrutiny following a recent investigative report about its alleged long-term biases against Black-founded and led charter schools. This report has captured national attention, with publications like RealClear Education highlighting the issue. Subsequently, the Philadelphia City Council has scheduled hearings in December to take a deeper look into these allegations.



The [African American Charter School Coalition](#) (AACSC) organized press conferences in Harrisburg and Philadelphia in wake of the report to advocate for sweeping reforms in both the Charter School Law and the Philadelphia Board of Education (BOE) policies. Proposed reforms entail the establishment of an independent charter school authorizer, overhauling SDP's charter school evaluation criteria, eliminating a surrender clause previously set by SDP for charter schools, and enforcing a moratorium on charter non-renewals until all recommended reforms are implemented.

Held the State Capitol Complex, the AACSC's first press conference addressed the need for Pennsylvania's charter school law reform. Speakers urged the General Assembly and the governor to delegate charter school authorization to a neutral body, citing successful precedents in other states where universities, nonprofits, or educational departments have been appointed as charter authorizers.

The second press conference, stationed outside the SDP headquarters, concentrated on the alleged prejudiced charter school evaluation framework the Board of Education uses. Highlighting the disproportionate impact this has on Black-founded and led charter schools, AACSC called for an immediate moratorium on charter school closures until the evaluation

system is revamped.

This series of events was catalyzed by the controversial report that investigated the claimed SDP bias. Though the Board of Education publicized that the report cleared them of any biases, [Dawn Chavous](#), AACSC's spokesperson, underscored evidence suggesting otherwise, particularly noting specifics on page 123. This report was instigated by a Philadelphia City Council resolution demanding an investigation into the suspected systemic racism within the district. SDP retained Ballard Spahr for the probe, a decision questioned due to the district's long term financial relationship with the law firm. Initially projected to conclude in September 2022, the investigation dragged on for two years, attributed to SDP's resistance to turn over requested documentation.

AACSC raised red flags about the Board's influence over the investigation, especially its interactions with another attorney and because certain individuals linked to the BOE and the former School Reform Commission were summoned by District officials prior to their official interviews. Curiously, the Board overlooked possible violations of the Sunshine Act from their prior executive sessions. Allegations arose suggesting that the Board premeditated decisions regarding the charter schools' fate, pressuring the Charter Schools Office (CSO) to produce desired outcomes in evaluations. The probe further spotlighted potential conflicts of interest involving the CSO, the Board, and the charter schools, with suspicions that financial motives could be dictating decisions on charter applications, expansions, and [charter school renewals](#).

The timing of the report's release also raised eyebrows. Although the investigation was finalized on August 31, 2023, its publication was postponed until October 6—a late Friday preceding a holiday weekend—severely limiting the AACSC's window for response.

The findings of the investigation were revealing. Since December 2017, Black and minority-led schools encountered more rigorous evaluations, leading to a significant number of African American charter school students being displaced due to resultant school closures. Despite recognizing these disparities six years earlier, the Board's lack of action only exacerbated the issue. The investigation also criticized the present evaluation framework's effectiveness, evidenced by the recent closure of Southwest Leadership Academy in June.

AACSC maintains that Pennsylvania's charter school authorization system is fundamentally flawed. The advocacy group continues to urge both the state government and the School District of Philadelphia to implement reforms to eradicate a system that persistently disadvantages Black students.

A copy of the investigation's findings can be found at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DVtYWaX9uOPbrHxzjpLd0l1bQ8WJqYA/view>.

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