

Good partners

Merger of two strong education centers should improve charter schools

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Charter schools in Ohio have made strides toward higher quality in the past few years, thanks in part to law changes that tightened accountability rules and forced closure of chronically failing and mismanaged schools.

But the field still is crowded with weak schools and school sponsors that lack the resources and expertise to fulfill their duty, which is to make sure their schools are following the law, are fiscally sound and well-managed and, when they're falling short, to help them improve or close them.

So it's particularly good news for the charter-school movement that two of the most-capable sponsors, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio, or ESCCO, plan to merge their efforts into a statewide operation by June 2011.

The main idea behind the charter-school movement is to free educators to innovate, by giving them dispensation from many of the rules governing traditional public schools. The goal always has been to allow an array of choices.

But that doesn't mean just anyone can run a school, let alone guarantee that someone else's school is viable. Proper oversight typically costs more than the fees sponsors are legally permitted to charge their schools, so a sponsor needs to have resources beyond those fees.

Ohio has nearly 70 charter-school sponsors, many of which lack the capacity and expertise to make sure the schools in their charge are up to par. Others lack the motivation, because they make ends meet by selling services, such as managing finances, to their schools. In those situations, sponsors might put a higher value on continuing to sell those services than on making sure children in the schools are succeeding.

By combining their efforts, Fordham and ESCCO can offer more would-be charter-school operators the sound sponsorship they need to avoid the financial problems and management failures that doom so many well-intended charter efforts.

In its primary role as a provider of services- special-education instruction, professional development, purchasing and the like - to traditional school districts, ESCCO has earned the confidence and affiliation of 25 central Ohio districts serving more than 200,000 children, making it the largest such agency in the state. It is ideally suited to provide charter schools with technical assistance.

Fordham, a nonprofit organization affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, is a national voice in education reform and research, bringing a broad perspective on the best approaches to building strong schools.

By combining their resources, the two should form a powerful support structure for charter schools in their charge.

Both organizations have committed not to sell supplemental services to their charter schools, and both support a proposed rule change before the State Board of Education that would require competitive bidding for such transactions.

Currently, they sponsor a total of 12 schools around the state. They have turned down many more requests for sponsorship than they have accepted. That's an indication that they're serious about working with only those schools that are likely to succeed.

Their partnership bodes well for school choice in Ohio.