Policy Matters Ohio

Press statement

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Questions about the Columbus Plan (HB 167)

In December 2012, Mayor Michael Coleman convened the Columbus Education Commission (CEC), made up of 25 representatives from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, to consider the challenges facing Columbus City Schools. Among a set of sweeping changes it proposed in April, the CEC recommended legislative action to establish the mayor's office as a charter school sponsor and to allow the Columbus schools to share property tax revenue with charters.[1]

Neither the CEC report nor House Bill 167, the Columbus Plan legislation that has moved quickly through the General Assembly, address the many costs and questions associated with the plan.

Charter school sponsorship

The Columbus Plan authorizes the mayor's office, with the approval of the Columbus City Council, to sponsor charters located in the district. Giving this authority to an entity with no education-related infrastructure or experience is an abrupt, unprecedented change in Ohio law. Proponents suggest mayoral sponsorship will increase the number of good charters in Columbus by allowing the mayor's office to recruit the best charter models to the city. They also assert that it will bring more local accountability to Columbus' charter sector. These proposals raise the following concerns, which have not been addressed in the debate about the Columbus Plan.

- **Authorizing the mayor's office to sponsor charter schools does not increase local control.** Since control would extend only to schools signing a contract with the mayor's office, it is not clear how these changes will decrease the number of failing charters. The mayor's office will have neither the power to close existing charter schools in the district nor to prevent new start-up charters from opening under different sponsors.
- **Sponsors do more than recruit charter schools.** Sponsors monitor the academic and fiscal performance of charters and their compliance with charter school laws; as Policy Matters and others have documented, many Ohio sponsors fail to meet basic requirements.[2] This highlights the difficulties of sponsorship, the ways that Ohio law provides an incentive for sponsors to keep low-performing schools open, and the problems of maintaining quality charters in a system that lacks strong accountability measures.[3] Presenting the sponsorship role as primarily about recruitment oversimplifies the role of sponsors.

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[1] Columbus Education Commission. (2013, April). FutureReady Columbus, retrieved at http://bit.ly/19mBFcg.
[2] See, for example, DePaoli, J & van Lier, P. (2013, January). "Avoiding Accountability: How charter operators evade Ohio's automatic closure law," online at www.policymattersohio.org/charters-jan2013, and "Added scrutiny of charter schools in city & state is overdue, but finally coming," (2013, May 21). *The Vindicator*, http://bit.ly/10irXEd. Also see the 2013 National Charter School Study by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes, which found that Ohio charters fare poorly compared to district schools in reading and math. Online at credo.stanford.edu/.
[3] Sweigart, J. (2013, June 17). Millions spent on oversight for troubled charter schools. *The Dayton Daily News.* http://www.mydaytondailynews.com/news/news/millions-spent-on-oversight-for-troubled-charter-s/nYK2N/

- **The mayor's office lacks educational expertise.** Unlike the Columbus school district and other sponsors, the mayor's office has no expertise that it can draw on to oversee and support charter schools. HB 167 marks the first time an entity with no background in education will be allowed to sponsor Ohio charters. Currently, eligible sponsors include school districts, educational service centers, state universities, and qualified nonprofits with an "educational orientation" – all organizations with at least some education-related infrastructure in place. The CEC itself recognizes this lack of expertise and calls for the creation of a director of educational improvement to assist in addressing education issues and to work as a liaison between the city and school district. Similarly, the CEC recommends the creation of an independent, nonprofit public/private partnership to manage a proposed "innovation fund," oversee plan implementation, and provide the mayor's office with the educational infrastructure it lacks.

Funding the Columbus Plan

The costs of establishing an infrastructure to support the mayor's office are not clearly spelled out, but will likely be an expensive endeavor that will draw funds from the Columbus schools. At the same time, the plan authorizes the district to share levy revenue with charter schools. The legislation lacks specifics on how much of the levy will go to charters, the qualifications charters will have to meet, and how much each school can receive. The commission says that these decisions should be left to the public/private partnership. Some questions remain, including:

- **How much will the new education infrastructure cost?** Should a levy pass, HB 167 would direct revenue to a proposed "innovation fund" and a "partnering community schools fund." As written, the legislation would potentially direct only district revenue to the innovation fund. Neither the legislation nor the CEC have spelled out costs associated with the new position of director of educational improvement and the partnership. With the district facing a $25 million budget shortfall, the possibility that critical public dollars might be diverted to fund these new entities and recruit new charter schools is concerning.

- **Who's accountable?** Neither the CEC report nor HB 167 include measures to hold the proposed new entities accountable for public funds they may spend. The CEC report calls for up to $50 million in district, city, private, and nonprofit funding, but with no guarantees of external contributions, the innovation fund is set to be funded solely from the district's share of a successful levy. The CEC report indicates that the innovation fund will be used for "replication of high-performing district schools and high-quality charter schools" but gives no specifics. It is unclear whether the school board, mayor's office, or a proposed internal auditor will oversee the partnership and the fund. This could set yet another dangerous precedent for putting public dollars into private hands, without meaningful oversight or accountability.

Mayoral sponsorship, and the infrastructure it requires, will add bureaucracy even as the Commission seeks to streamline administration and increase accountability within the school district. In the end, these proposals are built on quick fixes and trendy ideas, not on the solid, sustainable kinds of solutions students, parents, and educators need in Columbus.

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Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute with offices in Cleveland and Columbus.