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August 23, 2010

MEMORANDUM

TO: Legislative Education Study Committee

FR: David Harrell

RE: STAFF BRIEF: VARIETY IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

As listed in the directory posted on the website of the Public Education Department, 81 charter schools will be operating in school year 2010-2011, in 21 districts throughout New Mexico. Of those 81 schools, 32 have either been chartered initially or had their charters renewed by the Public Education Commission (PEC); the rest have been chartered or renewed by their respective local school boards. Forty-eight of the 81 charter schools will be located within the Albuquerque Public Schools district. While all of those schools operate under a charter, they do not all operate in the same way or for the same reasons.

For many people, the phrase “charter school” may suggest a more or less fixed image of a particular kind of school. In actual practice, however, the phrase only begins to describe what charter schools are and what they do. In addition to some fundamental differences according to their authorizer – whether a local school board or the PEC – charter schools in New Mexico are further diverse in terms of their missions, their student demographics, their pedagogical approaches or philosophies, their facilities, and their results. Clearly, not all charter schools are cast from the same mold.

One indication of this variety is the categorization of New Mexico’s charter schools in the recent program evaluation by the Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) (see *Legislative Finance Committee’s Program Evaluation of New Mexico Charter Schools*, July 23, 2010). Using concept categories employed by charter schools throughout the country, the LFC identified multiple charter schools in New Mexico that fit into the following categories, among others:

- culture and dual language schools;
- technology and online learning;
- at-risk and career schools;
- arts-based schools;
- environment schools; and
- specialty schools.

Perhaps an even more telling indication of this variety may be reflected in the schools represented in this presentation:

- Turquoise Trail Elementary School, a PreK-6 school in Santa Fe, is the only remaining charter school of the original five authorized under the State Board of Education through legislation enacted in 1993. As such, it is the only conversion charter school in New Mexico.
- El Camino Real Charter School, a K-12 start-up charter school in Albuquerque, has reached the final stage of the school improvement cycle and has received funds through the federal School Improvement Grant program (see *Staff Brief: Use of Federal School Improvement Grant Funds*, June 15, 2010).
- Gordon Bernell Charter School, a 9-12 school in Albuquerque, offers a curriculum and environment for adult students who have been out of school for an extended time, including inmates at the Bernalillo County Metropolitan Detention Center and recently released inmates in the Bernalillo Community Custody Program.
- New Mexico School for the Arts, a 9-11 school that opened in Santa Fe in August 2010, is a residential school with certain admissions criteria that will provide instruction in traditional subjects together with a focus on one of several arts-related curricula.

Presenters

Describing their respective schools' mission, student demographics, programs, challenges, results, and other features are the following presenters:

- Ms. Sandra Davis, Head Administrator, Turquoise Trail Elementary School;
- Ms. Pamela Engstrom, Head Administrator, El Camino Real Charter School;
- Ms. Greta Roskom, Head Administrator, Gordon Bernell Charter School; and
- Dr. Jim Ledyard, Head of School, New Mexico School for the Arts.