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WHO KNOWS BEST?

RICK PIERCY

I agree with Marilou Rider (“Let’s Level the Playing Field,” Sept. 26). The movie “Waiting for Superman” is going to stir things up and start a new conversation about how we improve our public education system. I also agree that parents need to have accurate information when deciding on a school for their children. That said, I feel compelled to “level the playing field” by correcting a few statements in Ms. Rider’s editorial.

First, Ms. Rider states, “Parents need to know Victor Valley Union High School District doesn’t have control over the choice of teachers hired, curriculum purchased, or the quality of instructional methods employed at the three charter schools.” This is simply not the case. Anyone who proposes to start a charter school must petition a school district for the right to start the school. The petition includes 16 required elements that the District must certify and to which they must hold the Charter accountable.

The very first element is a comprehensive description of the educational program of the school including the method of instruction, types of curriculum and interventions that will be used. The second element describes how the school will measure pupils and the outcomes for success that will be identified. Most importantly, the fifth element requires the applicants for the Charter to provide a detailed description of the qualifications to be met by all individuals employed by the school. All charter schools fall under NCLB requirements for Highly Qualified Teachers and should so state in the petition.

The Charter petition is not something the school district or the petitioners should take lightly. The Lewis Center’s petition for the Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy in San Bernardino is 521 pages long. That said, once the school district approves the Charter they agree to the fiduciary requirement of oversight. More importantly, the district can and should revoke a Charter that doesn’t comply with the 16 required elements of their charter, thus the reason for the 14th element, “the dispute resolution process.”

As the past Chairman of the State Board of the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA), I can tell you that we, too, feel a need for full disclosure and think that parents should have all the information before choosing a school for their child. Parents should understand the difference between an independent and dependent charter school. Many school districts have used both types of Charters as “dumping grounds” for the hardest to serve students. We refer to these schools as “ChINOS” Charter in Name Only schools. We have seen districts choosing to charter their own dependent schools; one for the highest scoring children, and the other for those children that might bring the score down. We have seen districts compel Charters to take all those students who have been expelled, are discipline problems, or who are on the verge of dropping out. At CCSA we believe that every child should be given a great education, in a safe and nurturing environment. To that end we are actively engaged in assisting districts in the process of non-renewal or revocation of low performing Charters.

Charter schools are about empowering parents, students and teachers. The intent of the Public Charter School law was to allow new and innovative schools to act as incubators for new ideas and educational practices. We want to see those best practices put in place in all schools. We want all parents to have the right to decide where their child will go to school. Personally, I want to send a message to Washington and Sacramento that my children and grandchildren don't belong to you and believe it or not, I might actually know what is best for them. Now that levels the playing field.

Rick Piercy is President/CEO of the Lewis Center for Educational Research in Apple Valley.

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