

1 Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations
2 Approved by Domestic Public Policy Task Force, 12/1/99
3 Approved by the Executive Committee, 12/8/99

4 **Statement on Public Education and The Charter School Movement**

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7 **Background:**

8 The charter school program was created in Wisconsin in 1993 to provide educational alternatives to
9 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Charter schools, which are publicly funded,
10 nonsectarian, tuition-free schools established by contract between a public entity and school
11 operators, are exempt from most state public school regulations. They serve both students at risk of
12 failing or dropping out of school and those seeking a general education. School boards and other
13 entities authorized to establish charter schools are responsible for holding the schools' operators
14 accountable for providing quality education. During the 1997-98 school year, 18 charter schools in 14
15 Wisconsin school districts enrolled 1,472 students and spent approximately \$7.4 million. A number of
16 other states have established charter school programs; these programs vary significantly from state to
17 state.

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19 **Statement:**

20 The American Jewish community's continuing support of public education has been based upon the
21 longstanding conviction that quality education is vital to preparing young people for full and productive
22 participation in American society. Access to public education afforded immigrant Jews, as well as
23 other newcomers, the foundation for future opportunity. As public schools seek new ways to expand
24 their effectiveness and address new educational challenges, the Council will support sound innovative
25 programs that improve public education. Publicly funded charter schools have gained increasing
26 currency as a potentially valuable vehicle for such reform. Public schools play a central role in
27 teaching democracy and common civic values and in fostering tolerance, respect, and appreciation for
28 diversity within our nation. The Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations remains
29 committed to supporting, strengthening, and sustaining these schools.

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31 Charter schools are less regulated than other public schools. Adequate oversight of these schools,
32 therefore, remains a concern. In addition, information about the degree to which student learning may
33 be improved awaits the outcome of studies now underway. Although state charter laws generally
34 mandate that these schools may not violate constitutional requirements regarding the separation of
35 church and state and may not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, or gender, the deregulated
36 nature of charter schools may in fact allow schools to contravene these laws.

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38 Consequently, careful public oversight and accurate accountability measures are critical. Appropriate
39 safeguards, adequately funded monitoring procedures, and open records must be in place to protect
40 against these abuses and fiscal irresponsibility as well as against educational failures. In order to
41 effectively evaluate the charter school experiment and compare educational outcomes with other
42 public schools, standardized and consistent methods should be required to measure pupil progress.
43 The goal of this experiment should be to strengthen the system as a whole and create innovation
44 within the system - not set up an outside structure.

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46 Properly structured and monitored, charter schools may prove to be one among several effective
47 vehicles for education reform within the public school system. We therefore support continued
48 experimentation with these schools and will work to ensure that they operate in accordance with the
49 following criteria:

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51 • The development of charter schools is accompanied by increased efforts to improve existing
52 public schools. The following must not be diminished, in any way, by the creation or maintenance
53 of charter schools: efforts to upgrade the qualifications and compensation of teachers, to decrease

1 class size, to improve parental involvement in school decision-making, to repair school facilities
2 and to increase funding sources for traditional public schools.
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- 4 • As publicly funded schools, Charter schools must be held to the same standards as other public
5 schools regarding the constitutionally mandated separation of Church and state.
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- 7 • Charter schools do not discriminate in admission, employment policies, or deny participation in
8 any program or activity on the basis of race, gender, religion, national origin, sexual orientation or
9 physical, mental, emotional or learning disabilities.
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- 11 • Adequately funded monitoring systems and appropriate oversight bodies are in place for regular
12 periodic assessment, evaluation, and reporting including both fiscal and academic accountability,
13 discrimination, and church-state separation concerns.
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- 15 • Educational performance standards consistent with other public schools are set that charter
16 school teachers and students are required to meet.
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- 18 • Charter schools must employ well-qualified professional staff, and adequate safeguards to
19 address working conditions and rights should be incorporated in contract and employment
20 provisions for school employees.
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- 22 • Limits are set on the number of charter schools that may be established or the percentage of
23 public school students authorized to attend them in each state, so that the charter school
24 experiment can be adequately evaluated before it is permitted to expand further.
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- 26 • To ensure accountability to the community, charter schools should be governed at a local level
27 and not solely by some outside authority such as the legislature or state department of education.
28 Such monitoring is especially important because charter schools are exempt from most state
29 education regulations and because their effectiveness is still largely unknown.