

Highlights of [GAO-06-73](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

D.C. has a larger percentage of students in charter schools than any state. To help oversee D.C. charter schools, Congress established two authorizers—the Board of Education (BOE), which has an Office of Charter Schools responsible for oversight, and the independent Public Charter School Board (PCSB). Congress required the GAO to conduct a study of the authorizers.

This report—which completes GAO’s May 2005 study—examines the (1) authorizers’ resources, (2) oversight practices, and (3) actions taken once charter schools close. GAO examined BOE and PCSB monitoring reports, revenue and expenditure documents, and closure procedures.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the BOE Office of Charter Schools implement a risk-based oversight system to target monitoring to new and at risk charter schools. GAO recommends that the BOE create a routine process to review data collected by its Office of Charter Schools. GAO also recommends that the BOE, the PCSB, and D.C. Public Schools jointly establish a process to guide their actions after schools close, including a system for the secure transfer and maintenance of student records. BOE officials noted that they were taking actions that would address GAO’s recommendations. PCSB comments supported GAO’s third recommendation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-73.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Marnie Shaul at (202) 512-7215 or shaulm@gao.gov.

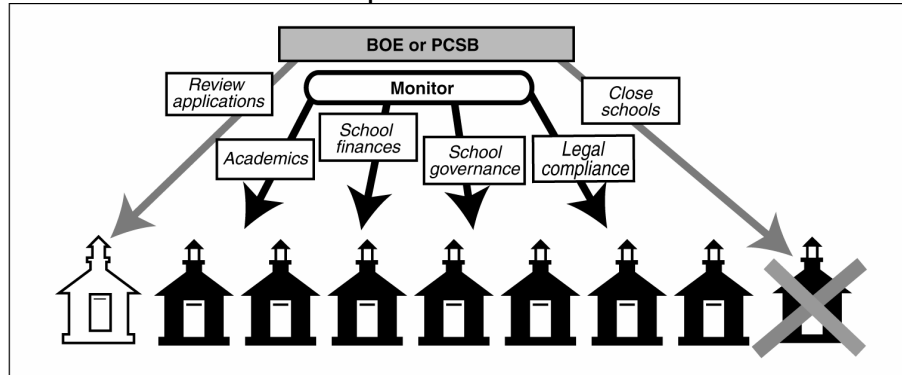
D.C. CHARTER SCHOOLS

Strengthening Monitoring and Process When Schools Close Could Improve Accountability and Ease Student Transitions

What GAO Found

The two D.C. charter school authorizers differed in revenue, number of staff overseeing schools, and use of D.C. services, but both spent their funds to support oversight activities. The BOE Office of Charter Schools had less revenue and fewer staff overseeing fewer schools than PCSB. It fulfilled its oversight responsibilities by using some D.C. Public School services and also occasionally calling upon D.C. agencies for financial operations reviews. The PCSB had a larger staff that oversaw more schools and had revenue more than two times larger than that of the BOE Office of Charter Schools. The PCSB did not use any D.C. Public Schools services, but did refer one school to a D.C. agency for further examination. Despite these differences, both authorizers used most of their fiscal year 2004 expenses for in-house board operations, such as personnel, and also hired consultants to help monitor charter schools.

D.C. Charter School Authorizer Responsibilities



Source: GAO analysis and Art Explosion.

Both D.C. authorizers provided technical assistance to schools and had similar oversight practices, such as tracking school academics and finances, but took different approaches. The BOE Office of Charter Schools, with only 3 staff, provided the same level of oversight to all of its 16 schools and thereby limited its ability to target additional resources to schools requiring more assistance. Moreover, when the BOE Office of Charter Schools gave its Board monitoring information on its charter schools, the Board—also responsible for the city’s 167 traditional schools—did not regularly review that information. In contrast, the PCSB targeted additional oversight on new charter schools and those where problems had been identified. The PCSB also granted more flexibility to well-managed schools. Although problems persisted at some schools, the PCSB’s targeted system enabled it to focus more attention on these schools.

Once D.C. charter schools closed, both authorizers took a number of actions to safeguard student records and public assets and inform parents of their children’s educational options; however, issues arose that both authorizers found difficult to adequately address, particularly when the closed school was insolvent. Managing and safeguarding student records was the most expensive and challenging aspect of closing schools, authorizers reported. Moreover, the authorizers’ closure processes were different each of the 9 times charter schools closed, which limited opportunities to build on past experiences.