

## **NM charter schools file complaint against state**

LAS CRUCES – Twenty-nine New Mexico charter schools have filed a complaint against the current director of the Options for Parents Division — commonly referred to as the Charter Schools Division — of the Public Education Department.

In a letter dated May 3, the [New Mexico Coalition for Charter Schools outlined 20 complaints](#) against the CSD and its director, Katie Poulos. The letter was sent to the [Public Education Commission](#), the elected body that has the power to grant, extend and revoke state-authorized charters.

The letter was written on behalf of 29 New Mexico schools — 20 signed the letter, seven lodged complaints but elected not to add their names for fear of reprisal or retaliation from the CSD, and two were district-authorized charter schools, which are not under the purview of the PEC.

Two Las Cruces charter schools signed the letter— New America School – Las Cruces and La Academia Dolores Huerta.

Charter schools are public schools which operate independent of public school systems. They are operated either by nonprofit or for-profit organizations. Although they are largely publicly funded, charter schools are exempt from many of the requirements imposed by state and local boards of education regarding hiring and curriculum. Charter schools can either be affiliated with an existing school district, or can operate under a state charter granted by the PEC. All of the charter schools in Las Cruces are state-chartered; none are chartered through Las Cruces Public Schools.

As public schools, charter schools cannot charge tuition or impose special entrance requirements; students are usually admitted through a lottery process if demand exceeds the number of spaces available in a school.

The letter of complaint points to a souring of the relationship between the state’s charter schools and the PED’s Charter School Division under Poulos’ direction.

“The relationship between the CSD and charter schools appears to have deteriorated significantly over the past year, and in numerous cases it appears broken,” the letter stated. “The current CSD Director is micromanaging oversight rather than evaluating outcomes and looking for ways to assist charters.”

Under state statute, the CSD was created to serve as support staff for the PEC. The letter

alleges the CSD has made a practice of overstepping its authority.

“The CSD is not entitled to do whatever it wants or act however it wants or ignore PEC directives, policies and procedures with respect to the PEC’s charter schools simply because it is a division of the New Mexico Public Education Department,” the letter states.

Listing nearly 50 examples, the schools describe a “general atmosphere of hostility between the CSD and state charters,” and accuse Poulos of having an “arrogant and controlling attitude.” The schools fear retaliation if they challenge or do not adhere to Poulos’ directives.

The schools also feel new reporting requirements imposed by the CSD — but not authorized by the PEC — are unduly demanding, burdensome and often duplicative.

“My concern is the dysfunctional relationship between Ms. Poulos and the PEC, and Ms. Poulos and the schools,” said Mark Hartshorne, principal of Alma d’Arte Charter High School in Las Cruces. Alma d’Arte is a state-authorized charter school, but is not a member of the New Mexico Coalition for Charter Schools.

Poulos did not respond directly to a request for comment, but PED Chief of Staff Sam Shumway said the department remains committed to the success of all students.

“PED is committed to ensuring that all charter schools meet high educational and operational standards,” Shumway said. “While accountability is frustrating for some, New Mexico’s students deserve high quality educational opportunities at all of our public schools, including charter schools. As we always have, we’ll continue to work with charter schools and the Coalition to address their concerns.”

Poulos came to PED in April of last year after serving as director of academic affairs for accountability at the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools, [according to her LinkedIn account](#).

Patricia Gipson, chairman of the PEC, told the Sun-News Friday that the commission has discussed the letter, and plans are underway to address the schools’ concerns.

“There was a brief discussion at our May meeting about the letter,” Gipson said. “PED Deputy Secretary Chris Ruszowski was there, as was Sam Shumway and the CSD Director, Katie Poulos. They were unwilling to respond to any part of the letter at that time.”

However, they ultimately agreed to schedule a meeting between representatives of the

PEC, PED, CSD and Coalition for Charter Schools. The meeting, which has not yet been scheduled by the PED, will take place behind closed doors, because "some of it is being addressed as a personnel matter," Gipson said.

Gipson acknowledged that the relationships between the CSD and charter schools have eroded, and that the situation is in need of attention — and a resolution.

"The schools have always had a pretty good working relationship with the CSD, and now that has done a (180)," Gipson said.

While the CSD operates as support staff to the PEC, Gipson said the staff is hired by the PED.

Greta Roskom, co-executive director of the New Mexico Coalition for Charter Schools, said the letter was never intended to be made public, and that she hopes it doesn't create a more adversarial relationship between the schools and the CSD. It was intended to draw the PEC's attention to a rapidly-deteriorating situation.

Roskom said the letter was met with gratitude from the PEC, but received a "lukewarm" response from the PED.

"Schools had been expressing these concerns since the beginning of the school year, which escalated through winter and spring," Roskom said. "We believe the fundamental problem has been communication. What (NMCCS Co-Executive Director Kelly Callahan) and I are hoping to achieve between CSD and the schools is better communication. And anything we can do to facilitate that can only help the PEC as the authorizer of the charters. We want to protect the schools' autonomy, and reduce the undue burdens that are being placed on them."

Hartshorne said there are clearly issues which need to be resolved.

"There is a great deal of anxiety and, frankly, fear about the dynamics of the interplay between the CSD and the PEC, and the CSD and school-site personnel," he said. "It is fair to say that here at Alma d'Arte, we have not received any untoward actions from the CSD, but many charter school administrators have expressed their concern in (the letter). In my view, Ms. Poulos would be wise to adopt a collegial approach that reaches out to the expertise and talent present in the PEC members and school people. We all have a great deal of work to perform to ensure the best education for our students."

Margarita Porter, principal of New America School – Las Cruces, declined to comment on the specific concerns outlined in the letter. Octavio Casillas, principal of La Academia

Dolores Huerta, could not be reached for comment.

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