

# Exclusive interview with Scott Pearson, executive director of the DC PCSB

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I recently had the pleasure of sitting down for a discussion with Scott Pearson, the executive director of the [DC Public Charter School Board](#). The first question on my list was why his organization is widely recognized as one of the best charter school authorizers in the country. Mr. Pearson answered without hesitation. “We are focused on school quality,” he explained. “In 2011 we introduced the Performance Management Framework tool to measure school performance and at the time it was one of the first such frameworks in the United States. We have stayed consistently faithful to the PMF and to the charter school agreements that we have reached.”

Part of this concentration on quality, Mr. Pearson indicated, is that the PCSB has steadfastly encouraged growth of high quality schools, supported the replication of high performing schools, and has closed under performing schools.

The second reason for the strong reputation, Mr. Pearson explained, is “our emphasis on transparency in a way that respects charter school autonomy.” For example, he pointed to the two thirds reduction in school expulsions that have been accomplished without the issuance of one regulation by his group. According to the PCSB executive director this milestone was reached simply as a result of making information public. Another example of the same phenomenon, Mr. Pearson detailed, is the PCSB’s mystery shopper initiative. He related that there was a misconception that charter schools were turning

away special education students for admission. The program has allowed the Board to demonstrate that exactly the opposite is true.

One important outcome of the Board's data transparency initiative, according to Mr. Pearson, is that information is now widely available showing the strong performance of DC charters performance with every demographic subgroup of students.

Mr. Pearson listed the final attribute of the PCSB that has boosted people's impression of its work as the quality of the staff. The executive director asserted that "PCSB's staff are exceptionally talented. We have been resolute in creating a culture that is not bureaucratic in nature but instead one that is mission-driven," he said. "Everyone at PCSB believes in the power of charter schools to significantly enhance the lives of students, and in the ability of authorizers to positively impact the charter school movement."

I then wanted to know from Mr. Pearson the current state of charters in the nation's capital. Again, he responded almost before I could finish my inquiry. "It is very strong," Mr. Pearson exclaimed. "Every year we see the quality of schools increasing and we see more and more students attending Tier 1 schools. Our wait lists keep growing. And this is happening as we operate alongside a reinvigorated DCPS. Both charter schools and DCPS schools are improving, and parents are noticing. Over the past seven years we've reversed a 50-year trend as enrollment in public schools has increased. The charter sector is growing. DCPS enrollment is going up. This is the first time in over 50 years that the number of kids in public schools is climbing. Gone is the talk of closing under-enrolled schools. In fact, many of us think that D.C. will need 50 new schools over the next 10 years."

Mr. Pearson continued, "There is no question of how far we have come. We have almost doubled the old DC CAS proficiency rates in reading and math

since 2006. On the NAEP exam, the nation's report card, where we were once the lowest scoring city in the nation we are now the fastest growing."

"Charters continue to outperform DCPS students in every subgroup," Mr. Pearson detailed, "and research from the [CREDO Institute](#) at Stanford University has demonstrated that students attending D.C. charters learn an additional 70 to 100 days a year compared to those in the traditional public schools. But what's most exciting is that both sectors keep getting better and better. DCPS' scores are higher today than charter scores were five years ago. It's a very positive dynamic for our city.

I asked Mr. Pearson for the reason that there are not more high quality charter school seats in consideration of the 8,500 individual students on wait lists. He replied, "At the PCSB we have a strong sense of obligation to grow our highest performing schools. I firmly believe that great schools are an engine for economic growth of our city, and we've approved most of our Tier 1 schools to grow and educate more students.

But I was searching for a reason from Mr. Pearson about why there is still an insufficient quantity of spaces to meet demand.

"There are several reasons that there has not been more expansion. Some of it has to do with charters' internal capacity to add school leaders. In addition, the facility issue continues to be frustrating for charters. DCPS currently has about 12 school buildings that are sitting empty. But with the anticipated demand we are going to need other solutions besides the takeover of surplus buildings. Recently, there have been a couple of meetings of about 50 individuals involving the [CityBridge Foundation](#), the [DC Schools Fund](#), the Deputy Mayor for Education, city planners, developers, financiers, bankers, and school leaders trying to find ways to ease the facilities challenges our schools face.

With charters making so much academic progress, I then turned to whether they should replace all traditional schools. “Not necessarily,” Mr. Pearson asserted. “Parents choose a school that is the right fit for their child and for their family. And in making this choice a lot of people prefer having a neighborhood school because the pupils are enrolled with those that live in close proximity to their homes. Also, the known school feeder patterns provide them a sense of security. Paradoxically, a strong traditional public school system provides families with more choice, not less.”

Logically then, I postulated whether we were getting to the point where there are too many charters because they could be pulling students away from the neighborhood schools. The PCSB executive director would have none of this line of reasoning. “More and more families are moving into the District. And more families are choosing to stay. In the past many families left when their child entered school. That pattern now is very different, particularly at the elementary school level and to some extent for those attending middle school.

“We are nowhere near the state in which we are threatening the viability of DCPS,” Mr. Pearson related. “There is still plenty of room for both types of schools. The more quality school options we offer, the more families will choose to live here.”

With the addition of successful charter management organizations like [BASIS](#), [Rocketship](#), and [Democracy Prep](#) coming to D.C., I asked Mr. Pearson if he wanted more high performing CMOs to come to town. “I used to believe that when I first assumed my position in 2012,” he responded. “But I came to realize that we have a lot of outstanding home-grown talent here. Schools like [DC Prep](#), [Achievement Prep](#), [Washington Latin](#), [Thurgood Marshall Academy](#), [Friendship](#), [KIPP DC](#), [Eagle Academy](#), [Two Rivers](#), and all of the bilingual schools, just to name a few; many cities would do anything to have charters such as these. We need to enable our best schools to teach more

students. We also have to realize that it is no small feat to have a CMO come to our area. When you look around the country, many quality schools fail when they try and operate outside of their original location.”

I then postulated that some of our local charters would not be approved now if they were to apply because of the board’s emphasis on being “Tier 1 on Day 1.” Mr. Pearson commented, “We only had two applications for new schools this cycle and we approved one. The board is looking at our process to see if there is a way to encourage more submissions. We want it to be a rigorous application process but it is a balance to make sure we are not discouraging people from trying to open new schools. Our challenge is to tolerate some risk but to also mitigate the chances for failure.

The final area of inquiry I approached Mr. Pearson about is whether charters should be allowed to have neighborhood admission preferences. Here the PCSB executive director became philosophical. “I have personally evolved on this issue. I used to be strongly against it. Our city-wide system of choice has allowed us to transcend neighborhood patterns,” he related. “But a neighborhood preference could spur development by attracting families to a particular area of town. Some school leaders have indicated to me that they have purposely opened in a particular Ward, such as 7 or 8, because their mission is to serve the low income children residing there. In addition, it may make it easier for a charter to open in a locality if it is allowed to serve the kids residing in the surrounding blocks. Also, many parents want their offspring going to school near home. For some of our most disadvantaged families having to travel long distances for their children’s school is expensive. Although kids now ride free on the buses and subways this is not true for the adult students. It also may be impossible to pull off time-wise based upon work and life schedules.

It may be that with safeguards to protect against segregation and the blocking

of access to high quality schools for those less fortunate, it could work. But this is a highly complicated subject and our first priority must be to ensure that a neighborhood preference doesn't freeze out kids who can't afford to live in the neighborhood. It is my understanding that D.C. Council member and education committee chairman David Grosso is seeking to explore school enrollment patterns. Let's see what comes out of that effort."