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Levin Center at Wayne Law Releases Report on Oversight of Michigan Charter Schools and their Authorizers

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Today, the [Levin Center at Wayne State University Law School](#) released the report it commissioned from the Citizens Research Council of Michigan (CRC) on the oversight of charter schools and their authorizers in Michigan. The CRC report, entitled "[Improving Oversight of Michigan Charter Schools and Their Authorizers](#)," focuses on the inadequacy of public oversight of charter school authorizers, the entities that are charged under Michigan law with authorizing and overseeing the performance of charter schools in the state. The Levin Center requested the report as part of its ongoing mission to promote effective oversight at all levels of government – federal, state, and local.

The CRC report finds that while the state can "force the closure of the lowest-performing schools" and can suspend authorizers that are not doing their jobs, there are virtually no state standards governing when those actions are necessary and appropriate, and there are no requirements for authorizers to report to the public on how they are spending state funds (up to 3% per pupil) they receive to monitor charter schools. To the extent there is oversight by an authorizer, that oversight is not public.

"Accountability is fundamental to good government, and oversight is fundamental to accountability," said former U.S. Senator Carl Levin, who is founder and chair of the Levin Center. "Both supporters and opponents of charter schools will agree that taxpayers need to know their money is being wisely spent. Based on today's report by the Citizens Research Council, we can't say whether or not that is true for charter schools because of the lack of oversight. The report identifies a number of ways Michigan could take meaningful steps to provide the needed accountability for charter school authorizers through better reporting and clear standards for these entities. I hope the Michigan legislature will pay particular attention to these findings and recommendations in this report so its lessons learned can be quickly implemented."

The report notes that Michigan differs from many other states in that it relies heavily on charter school authorizers, namely universities and community colleges, without setting minimum standards for authorizers to meet. There is no requirement that authorizers demonstrate that they have the experience, effectiveness, or capacity to do the work, and there is no system for certifying or approving who can authorize schools. Also, except for in Detroit, authorizers do not have to be accredited.

That makes it difficult for the public to know whether authorizers are effectively monitoring charter schools and properly spending funds they receive for their administrative work.

“This report shows that Michigan is an outlier among the states when it comes to public accountability for the authorizers of charter schools,” said Jim Townsend, director of the Levin Center and a former member of the Michigan House of Representatives. “According to the report, most states identify authorizer responsibilities in statute; Michigan does not.”

The CRC report lays out a series of actions that policy makers could take to close the accountability gap for charter school authorizers, including:

- Adopting administrative rules that set out requirements for the authorizers and provide better oversight of authorizers;
- Enacting statutes that define charter school authorizers’ oversight expectations and responsibilities;
- Imposing standards that make charter school authorizing a privilege that must be earned and maintained;
- Increasing funding to the Department of Education to enable it to conduct thorough oversight of charter school authorizers;
- Requiring independently prepared financial reports of authorizers’ charter school offices;
- Preventing charter schools from authorizer-shopping by barring charter schools from seeking authorization after they have been terminated by a current authorizer; and
- Requiring a rigorous process for approving the siting of charter schools that takes into account the needs of the communities being served by charter schools.

“This report does not address the performance of Michigan’s charter schools,” Townsend said. “Our purpose in requesting this report was to find out what mechanisms are in place to make sure the authorizers and charter schools are doing what they are supposed to be doing with the public money they receive. The CRC findings suggest we don’t know, and given the amount of money involved and the stakes involved, namely the education of our children, that needs to be fixed.”

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Through training, scholarship and civil discourse, the [Levin Center at Wayne Law](#) educates future attorneys, business leaders, legislators, and the public about their role in holding public and private institutions accountable and about the use of bipartisan, fact-based oversight as an instrument of good public policy. Formed in 2015, the Center is named in honor of former U.S. Sen. Carl Levin, Michigan's longest-serving U.S. senator, who retired in 2015 after 36 years in the Senate. Levin serves as chair of the Levin Center and on the Wayne State University Law School's faculty as a distinguished legislator in residence. Jim Townsend, a graduate of Wayne Law and a former congressional staffer and member of the Michigan House of Representatives, serves as the Center’s director. The Levin Center has offices in Detroit and Washington, D.C.