

The Board of Public Education

for the

City of Savannah and the County of Chatham

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February 4, 2008

Senate Education and Youth Committee Members
301-B Coverdell Legislative Office Building
Atlanta, GA 30334

Dear Legislators:

I am writing to you on behalf of the members of the Board of Education for the City of Savannah and the County of Chatham. Our elected Board opposes House Bill 881 for the following reasons:

1. LOCAL CONTROL / ACCOUNTABILITY: The Georgia Constitution places each school system under the management and control of an elected board of education. School Boards are accountable to the citizens who elect them. The Board of Education for the City of Savannah and the County of Chatham views with concern any legislative initiatives which would result in, or have the effect of, limiting the authority or the revenue generating potential of local school systems. We believe that HB 881, by creating an appointed commission to authorize charter schools, usurps the constitutional authority of our Board of Education. Such a commission will lack any firsthand knowledge of the needs of the district, will not know whether or not the applicants have any credibility or relationships in the community, and will not have any direct accountability to the citizens of Chatham County. As duly elected representatives of the citizens of Chatham County, we believe this legislation is clearly not in the best interest of the children and taxpayers who reside in Chatham County and may also be unconstitutional.

2. FUNDING: This bill, through creative language, has the effect of redirecting local property tax revenue to support schools not sanctioned by the local Board of Education (the amount of local funding would be deducted from the local system's state allotment, along with the state portion of the state funding attributable to the Commission approved Charter School). Local school boards would in effect be required to levy property taxes to support schools for which they have no management oversight or control.

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3. STATEWIDE SOLUTION TO A METRO ATLANTA ISSUE: We believe that the current charter school process, if properly implemented, is both adequate and appropriate. The Board of Education for the City of Savannah and the County of Chatham has a long history of supporting the options and opportunities provided by Charter Schools, when such a school makes sense for our community. As you know, Oglethorpe Academy was Georgia's first start-up charter middle school, and was nationally recognized as one of eight exemplary charter schools in the nation by the United States Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement. We have also approved charters for two more start-up charters: the Coastal Empire Montessori Elementary School and the Gateway to College Charter High School. We have also had two conversion charter schools (Mercer Middle School and Savannah Arts Academy) in our district. The Board of Education for the City of Savannah and the County of Chatham has strong working relationships and are partners with our existing charter schools – relationships which benefit the charter school, the district, the taxpayers of Chatham County, and ultimately the children. We believe any attempt to eliminate local Boards of Education from the chartering process to be counterproductive.

4. NO SILVER BULLET: We question the apparent view that Charter Schools are some sort of "silver bullet" which will "fix" public education. We believe much of the aggregated data often cited by charter school advocates to be misleading. For example, many successful public schools have elected to become conversion charter schools for flexibility reasons. These "charter schools" continue to be successful schools; however, their charter status did not "cause" them to be successful. We would like to see disaggregated data on gains in student achievement in start-up charter schools. We believe we have public schools in our district whose academic gains equal those of highest performing charter schools.

We respectfully ask that you vote against HB 881. As always, we appreciate your support for public education in Georgia.

Sincerely,



Lori Brady
Board of Education Member, District 6
Legislative Liaison

cc: Board of Education Members
Superintendent