

The Charter School Movement in Tennessee

Q & A with Matt Throckmorton, Executive Director of the Tennessee Charter Schools Association

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It's been a decade since Tennessee lawmakers paved the way for charter schools to operate in the state. With nearly 50 independent charter schools now in operation, the Tennessee Charter Schools Association (TCSA) has positioned itself to serve as advocates for the growing movement. TCSA divides its effort among three priorities: advocacy, charter school quality and accountability, and member services. A common thread that connects these priorities is advocating for the movement at the legislative level.

To gain some insight into TCSA's priorities for the 2013 legislative calendar, we spoke to Matt Throckmorton, TCSA's Executive Director. Here's a recap on the major takeaways from our conversation.



1. What are the major legislative priorities around charter legislation this year?

"We have them in four buckets: *Authorizer Reform, Facilities, Funding,* and then in general, we'll address a number of *Operational Items.*"

Authorizer Reform:

"In the authorizing process, there is evidence of it becoming more and more political. So we're pushing for a state-wide authorizer. The real key is that applications should be decided on the merit of the application, as opposed to the politics of it. So we want to defuse a lot of the tension that shows up every now and then, and just really focus on the quality of the application and the operators."

Facilities

"The most difficult thing is getting approved, and then after that finding a facility. So we're going to have a number of different recommendations. One of the big discussions that we'll raise is access to district facilities. There are more facilities available, in our opinion, in Memphis than in Nashville, but in both cities we think there should be a very predictable path to sharing facilities, having access to underutilized facilities, and then discussing the cost associated with it. We want to protect the taxpayers as much as anybody and the concern of having taxpayers pay for a building twice is something that we'll raise.

"It will be a combination of setting guidelines and creating an environment that fosters the negotiation to take place. Because right now, if a district wants to discuss facilities with an operator they can, and they have, so there's a number of charter schools that are in district buildings, and to varying degrees it works for them. But then if a district doesn't want to engage in negotiations, they simply don't have to. As a beginning point, if there is a building that is underutilized or vacant, there should be an expectation of maximum utilization of the building."

Funding

"This isn't necessarily legislation, but ensuring that there's transparency in the whole funding process."

General operational issues

"Right now, by state law, all charter school teachers have to participate in state retirement. For most of our teachers that works out really well. For some teachers and for some schools, they may not plan to be in the system for twenty years to reach full retirement, so being able to provide a 401k would be attractive. But we're going to have to change that law."

2. What are the chances of getting a statewide authorizer?

"A majority of the legislators are aware that there are improvements to be made to the system, so we're getting their input. Then it will shift to actually counting votes and negotiating. I'm optimistic that we'll make some progress; what the final design will be I'm not certain of yet."

3. What do you see as the major obstacles for charter legislation this year?

"In Tennessee, there's been a lot of reform in the cities, and that always invites a lot of discussion: how it will be applied, trying to determine the impact, unintended consequences, those types of things. In Tennessee we no longer run into complete opposition to charter schools, what the opposition now would like to see is a smaller footprint and a smaller overall role. So I think we'll have that kind of discussion."

4. How can schools help push forward meaningful charter school legislation?

"The first drafts of bills are coming soon, so operators should read and understand them. Having individual schools come to the capital, meet some of the key committee chairs and members of leadership, and talk about their experience is important as well. So they'll definitely need to get involved. If they're not able to come to the capital, we'll provide opportunities for them to get in touch with legislators, either through email or text."

5. How will the Shelby-Memphis County merger impact charter school funding in Memphis?

"It will be, as we go forward, part of the transparency discussion, which they will have to address regardless. As they're having that discussion, trying to bring together two funding and two formula systems into one cohesive plan, there's an opportunity for transparency. In my communication with the new, combined board, they have the attitude that they're happy to help resolve some of these questions. As to whether or not the funding goes up or down, it's unclear."

6. Any other major initiatives TCSA has that the world should know about?

"Part of state law that was put into place a few years ago is that charters have to go through annual board training, and that training has to be certified by the charter school association, but it doesn't have to be conducted by us. What we're going to do is begin hosting quarterly board training, focusing not on the overall training, but on committee work, so if you have an advocacy committee, or an academic committee, we'll be doing that in different cities. We're going to ramp-up the discussion around board training; failure to go through the training is failure to comply with state law, so it's a serious issue."

"And last, but not least, we're having our annual gala on May 18th in Nashville. This is where we recognize teacher of the year for elementary, middle and high school, innovative school of the

year, and advocate of the year. Last year we were packed with 250 people in Nashville, so this year we've moved to another location that will allow up to 350 people. We had over 200 nominations for teachers of the year!"

It's shaping up to be a busy year for the charter school movement in Tennessee. With more and more schools opening in the state, there's sure to be a steady stream of charter school news to digest. For timely updates, see TCSA's blog on their website, tncharterschools.org, or follow EdTec's Twitter feed at [@EdTecConnect](https://twitter.com/EdTecConnect). 🌱