



Governor Blanco  
PO Box 94004  
Baton Rouge, LA 70804-9004

October 14, 2006

RE: Dibert Elementary School Charter Denied  
Recovery School District & National Association of Charter School  
Authorizers' Lack of Accountability,  
Transparency, and Community Involvement

Dear Governor Blanco,

The Mid-City Neighborhood Organization (MCNO) of New Orleans believes that quality schools in our neighborhood is vital to our successful recovery. Since January 2006, MCNO has diligently worked to charter Dibert Elementary School; many man-hours, expense and effort were put into our charter application and amendments.

Unfortunately, on September 18th, 2006, we learned that the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) rejected our application. No reason was given for the denial. This was disappointing, though consistent with the capricious, callous and unprofessional manner in which the Recovery School District(RSD)officials and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NASCA)have mistreated MCNO throughout the application process. The purpose of this letter is to inform you and the public about how the State and national charter organizations are taking away New Orleans' neighborhood schools -- such as Dibert Elementary. We are bringing this issue to light because of our concern that we cannot create and maintain functional schools in New Orleans if these practices are allowed to continue.

The RSD was formed in 2003 to take over schools that were academically unacceptable. Following Hurricane Katrina, Executive Order KBB 2005-08 suspended many of the stipulations for becoming a charter school and it

greatly expanded RSD's power. During the Special Session in the Fall of 2005, RSD pledged that it "is committed to developing a strong model of parental and community collaboration" and "The RSD is committed to ensuring transparency regarding its processes and practices and accountability (at all levels)." Sadly, this has not happened.

Board members of MCNO, Dibert Elementary parents, teachers, professional educators, and several community stakeholders formed a Board of Trustees for Dibert Elementary's Charter application and hired the professional team of Education Design Management (EDM). This group has been working collaboratively on the charter application since January 2006. The Trustees who agreed up to oversee Dibert Elementary are very qualified, and consist of two Ph.D.s, three attorneys, three teachers and committed parents. EDM is equally qualified, fully staffed with school administrators, accounting and IT personnel, educators, a past school principal, and a successful charter applicant.

Throughout the application process, neither RSD nor NASCA worked with us as mandated by the State Charter Laws. Communications was at a minimum, difficult and sporadic; and at best, hollow. Please see our attached list of specific concerns for more detailed information about our experience in the charter process.

MCNO believes that RSD and NASCA may have violated Louisiana law by not involving local communities in the chartering process. One of our concerns is that to date, 25 charters have been granted by the RSD in New Orleans, 24 were granted to national out-of state charter organizations as opposed to local neighborhood organizations. The one exception is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School for Science and Technology, which was chartered through the Friends of King School with the active backing and monitoring of national civil rights organizations.

A review of the 25 charter schools evidences that none were granted to Louisiana-based professional education teams such as EDM, but instead, were all awarded to out-of-state companies. It is though MCNO is being punished for hiring a Louisiana-based company. Our disappointment in this turn of events is immense. It is inappropriate for NASCA and the RSD to suggest that they have assisted communities to reopen schools in New Orleans; instead, they have selectively assisted and approved only charter applicants with national (likely NACSA member) management organizations and political connections.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), LDE, RSD outsourced their authority and the decision-making process regarding

the awarding of charter schools to NACSA, a Chicago based organization. NACSA's recommendations were final. BESE simply rubber-stamps NACSA's decision. During a meeting before the BESE Board, the chair of the BESE Board said that the Board can only rubber stamp NACSA's decision, it can not make a separate decision on a charter application. With this absolute delegation of authority, RSD and LDE employees have consistently met our requests for information and/or assistance with obfuscation, bad information, no communication, inconsistency, and endless meaningless delays.

Several times in the application process we experienced contempt by State officials towards New Orleans and New Orleanians. When we had our first interview before NACSA in the Spring of 2006, it was apparent that NACSA's interviewers had not read our application. In fact, one member of the review team simply stated he was "just flown in from Chicago for that day to do interviews." Despite this, we felt we had a strong and positive interview and in fact, was granted a "Provisional Approval." MCNO was informed that we need only to address four areas of our application. We thoroughly did that (as you can see in the attachment "Supplemental Application for Charter").

On September 7, 2006, we were interviewed by NACSA for a second time. At the close of the interview, Shenita Johnson Gerard (NACSA's lead interviewer) was specifically asked, "Are there any questions that we have not answered to your satisfaction?" Her answer was that the interview was over." When MCNO received its denial letter, we were shocked. If NACSA or RSD wanted to assist an organization like MCNO, it merely needed to communicate with us (during the nine month application process), express their concern and allow us to address it.

Upon receiving information on the condition of anonymity, NACSA's and RSD's behavior and internal position to exclude the awarding of a charter school to MCNO was better understood. MCNO was informed that NACSA was never going to give us their approval because our professional team is Louisiana-based and that Louisiana's education track record shows that we are unable to administer schools successfully.

In retrospect, we now realize that the vague reassurances from Dr. Robin Jarvis and Shenita Gerard such as "we'll be happy to work with you" were never intended to be followed up with substance, content, specifics, or timely, helpful meetings. When they did meet with us, it was separately, and each deferred to the other. Ultimately, they both took the position that we "convert" Dibert Elementary to a Type 5 Charter after it first became an RSD school. The

"conversion" process was to take place mid-year (i.e., January 2007) and via a process that was not yet developed nor legitimized. Later, they surprised us with the statement that the "conversion" would now have to be approved by the full staff and administration of Dibert Elementary. Effectively, they led us down a non-path.

The problem here is that RSD knew MCNO received a provisional charter approval in June 2006 for Dibert Elementary, nevertheless, it decided to open an RSD school in September 2006 when there were other nearby schools without pending charter applications to open a RSD school. These other schools do not have the same level of neighborhood attachment that Dibert Elementary has and might have benefited from an influx of state interest. Instead, we find ourselves in the uncomfortable and inexplicable position of competing with the state and other charter applicants for our own neighborhood elementary school.

MCNO remains committed and prepared to operate our community-based charter school. We are requesting that a new 3rd party properly review our charter application. We are confident in the strength of our application and expect to ultimately be awarded our charter should it ever get an honest read.

Respectfully,

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Cc: Sen. Charles Jones, Chairman of the Senate and Governmental Affairs  
Committee  
Sen. Chris Ullo, Chairman of the Senate Education Committee  
Sen. Edwin Murray