

Why GAO Did This Study

Almost 40 percent of all public school students in the District of Columbia (D.C. or District) were enrolled in charter schools in the 2010-11 school year. The D.C. School Reform Act established the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) for the purpose of authorizing and overseeing charter schools.

Congress required GAO to conduct a management evaluation of PCSB. GAO addresses the following: (1) the mechanisms in place to review the performance and operations of PCSB, (2) the procedures and processes PCSB has in place to oversee and monitor the operations of D.C. charter schools, and (3) the resources available to charter schools for their operations and facilities. GAO interviewed officials from D.C. agencies and 7 charter schools and reviewed oversight procedures for PCSB and charter schools. GAO also reviewed the processes for providing resources to charter schools and analyzed data on these resources.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Mayor of the District of Columbia direct the Department of Real Estate Services to disclose all factors considered in reviewing charter school offers for former D.C. school buildings and make available to schools, in writing, the reasons the offers were rejected. The District agreed with our recommendations and noted that the Department of Real Estate Services has already taken steps to improve the process for awarding former D.C. school buildings to charter schools.

View [GAO-11-263](#) or key components. For more information, contact George A. Scott at (202) 512-7215 or scottg@gao.gov.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CHARTER SCHOOLS

Criteria for Awarding School Buildings to Charter Schools Needs Additional Transparency

What GAO Found

Although the Mayor appoints members to the board, PCSB has operated outside of the control of the Mayor and the Chancellor of traditional D.C. public schools; however, several agencies review PCSB's performance and operations. The D.C. Council holds annual hearings to examine PCSB's organization, personnel, budget, programs, policies, contracting, and procurement. The Office of the Chief Financial Officer oversees PCSB's budget development, operations, and financial reporting and reviews PCSB's monthly financial reports and year-end audits. Other offices monitor compliance with applicable laws and may conduct investigations or audits of PCSB when issues arise.

PCSB launched its new performance accountability system to oversee the District's charter schools in school year 2009-2010. However, in October 2010, just weeks before the results were to be released, PCSB decided to withhold the results from the public due to concerns about data accuracy and plans to use the data collected to further test and develop the system. The new system, called the Performance Management Framework (PMF), is designed to assess charter schools using common measures for academic performance, compliance with applicable laws, and financial management, among other things. As it implements the new system for the 2010-2011 school year, PCSB is currently collaborating with charter schools to develop and revise the system, and has more recently begun providing more detailed information to charter schools about how it will revise the system.

D.C. charter schools may receive funding from local, federal, and private sources for their operations and facilities and also have access to other District resources, including former D.C. school buildings; however, the criteria for awarding former school buildings to charter schools could be more transparent. The primary source of support for charter schools is local per-pupil funding, which is allocated to charter schools on the same basis as all public schools in the District. Charter schools also receive a per-pupil allotment from the District for facilities. In addition to local funds, charter schools are eligible to receive federal formula funding, federal discretionary grants, and private funding, such as foundation grants and commercial loans to purchase or renovate school buildings. To date, charter schools lease or will lease about half of the former D.C. school buildings that have been made available pursuant to a provision in D.C. law that provides charter schools with a right of first offer for these buildings. However, we found that the District does not include in its requests for offers all factors it may consider, such as economic development or other goals of the Mayor, when determining whether to accept or reject an offer. In addition, the District does not sufficiently document the basis for rejecting offers. Charter school officials and advocates expressed concern about the transparency and fairness in how the District makes decisions regarding former D.C. school buildings.