

## Montgomery's unchartered waters

Monday, June 7, 2010

MONTGOMERY COUNTY Schools Superintendent Jerry D. Weast is recommending that two applications for public charter schools be rejected. Little surprise there, considering the approval process for starting up these alternative public schools is a little like letting McDonald's decide if Burger King can move in next door. It's yet more evidence that Maryland needs to change its antiquated charter law.

Mr. Weast's recommendation to deny bids by the nonprofit [Crossway Community Inc.](#) and [Global Garden Charter School](#) is likely to be followed by the county Board of Education when it votes Tuesday. In a memo to the board, Mr. Weast outlined how a panel of education stakeholders reviewed the applications. Significant concerns were raised with Global Garden's proposed academic design and whether school leaders grasped how to operate a school. Crossway, which has successfully operated social-service and children's programs for 20 years, seemed to pose a tougher decision, but the panel concluded that concerns with funding, operational issues and staffing precluded approval. Such concerns can't be discounted, and it is in no one's interest to start up charter schools that are destined to fail.

Nonetheless, we have to wonder just how impartial this process is. How else to interpret the panel's apparent umbrage over Global Garden's suggestion that the traditional public school system does not "cultivate each child's natural curiosity through a vigorous curriculum that emphasizes inquiry, discovery, and authenticity." Montgomery County has an excellent school system, but it is by no means perfect. Surely, there are some children who would benefit from a different learning environment, such as the year-round calendar and extended school-day proposed by Global Garden or the Montessori model with "wraparound" services such as health care advanced by Crossway. Parents should have choices, and education as a whole benefits from healthy competition.

A spokesman for Mr. Weast stressed that the superintendent is not anti-charter and tried several years ago to get the noted [Knowledge is Power Program](#) (KIPP) network to start a school in Montgomery. The proof, though, is in the pudding: There are no charter schools in Montgomery today, and the last serious effort to start one occurred a decade ago. Statewide, there are only 36 public charter schools, mostly in Baltimore City. That dismal record is the result of a bad state law that puts all the power over whether there should be school choice in the hands of local school officials.

