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Who Owns Our School?

By: Bob Schaffer, LCHS Principal

A rather active parent of longstanding membership in the Liberty community asked me once, “So, who actually owns Liberty?” Yes, I suppose the answer is confusing, but it’s quite important nonetheless.

Parents own Liberty. But *how* we own it is an intricate construct: Liberty’s ongoing academic operations are public; yet, the school’s land, buildings and furnishings are private.

Let’s start with the public side. Our “charter” is effectively an academic operating agreement between Liberty’s parents – represented by our Board of Directors – and the Poudre School District, which is a subdivision of the state. As a charter school, Liberty’s authority to exist is Colorado’s Charter Schools Act (Article 30.5 of Title 22 for you attorneys). This law characterizes our operational and academic function (the “teaching” part) as a public, yet semi-autonomous, school.

Members of Liberty’s Board of Directors (BOD) are elected from the greater parent population. They are volunteers – crucial ones. They are the legal officers of the public part of Liberty – the entity responsible for carrying out the operational and academic functions as defined in Liberty’s charter.

Members of the BOD are the parent representatives chosen by the rest of us parents to maintain our parental ownership of our school. As such, Liberty is not owned by the Poudre School District. It is not owned by the state. It is truly commonly owned by the parents of students who attend Liberty.

Now to the private side of Liberty: What some find surprising is that Liberty’s buildings and school grounds are actually owned by a private, non-profit, corporation made up of a few of Liberty’s original founders and one newer Liberty parent. Knowing Liberty’s history is instructive here (Please read about the school’s history elsewhere in this publication).

Liberty’s original founding parents and initial investors put up their own private funds to buy our first building. Shortly thereafter, they formed the same non-profit corporation that today owns our buildings and the land upon which they sit.

This corporation is in fact a different entity than the one run by our more public BOD. This private building corporation exists for one reason alone – to provide land and building space for Liberty Common School at the lowest possible cost.

So, in delivering Liberty’s academic program, the BOD (again, acting on behalf of all us parents) actually rents our buildings from Liberty’s private building corporation. The funding to pay the

rent comes primarily from money the Poudre School District pays to Liberty, in accordance with our charter, in exchange for Liberty educating some of the district's schoolchildren – specifically, those choosing to attend Liberty. Funds not spent on rent, go to paying teachers, buying books, replacing supplies, maintaining computers, and keeping the lights on.

It's a win-win arrangement. On one hand, since the district does not buy, own, or maintain our facilities (like it must do for regular public schools), the taxpayers spend less to educate a student at Liberty than they do at regular government-owned schools.

On the other hand, the autonomy and parent ownership created in the Charter Schools Act allows Liberty the flexibility to design a more focused, purposeful, and ambitious school, and to operate it more efficiently. Our kids get a far better education for considerably less cost.

It also empowers us to be more confident stewards of Liberty's future. When we need more money for equipment and improved facilities, it is our duty as parents to do just like our founding parents did, and just like Liberty families have done ever since: We make the case, debate the merits, make some bold decisions, and ultimately pass the hat to get it done right.

The reality that parents actually own Liberty really matters. Our BOD and school administration have initiated various parent-led committees and subcommittees to define strategies for building improvements, better classroom supplies and materials, better science, computer, art, and music accommodations, better financial rewards for our most valuable instructors, and a few more enhancements.

There's no debate about whether ongoing improvements are needed for our entire K – 12 programs. What is still always up for discussion is how best to plan, finance, and move forward on the maintenance, improvements, and faculty compensation we need for the foreseeable future of our constantly improving enterprise.

If you'd like to participate in this vital level of planning, leadership and ownership of Liberty, please contact any Member of the BOD, or one of our school administrators, and we'll put you to work.

In the meantime, spend some time evaluating the true worth of our world-class K-12 charter school. Consider the value of an efficiently run institution that has a long and well-respected track record of being frugal and prudent with every dollar it spends.

Consider Liberty's remarkable history, and how dedicated parents always manage to pull together to give our children every academic advantage they need to be themselves prosperous in life. And never forget who the real owner of Liberty is, and who will ultimately determine its future success.

Liberty is not owned by PSD. It is not owned by the State. It is owned by us – all of us parents who are blessed to educate our kids here. Liberty is our responsibility.