Philadelphia charter administrators mired in corruption charges

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In late January, a federal grand jury added five new charges to a 62-count indictment against former Philadelphia charter school administrators for defrauding their schools of $6.7 million. The charges include wire fraud and conspiracy to obstruct justice.

The allegations charge that Dorothy June Brown, 75, a former Philadelphia Public School District (PPSD) principle, defrauded the city of funds meant for the administration of three public charters currently in her ownership: Planet Abacus, Laboratory, and the Agora Cyber Charter. Brown had several co-conspirators—Michael A. Slade Jr., 31, Joan Woods Chalker, 74, and Courteney L. Knight, 65, all holding administrative positions within the charters.

The allegations occur in the context of a recent announcement by Superintendent William Hite to close up to 37 Philadelphia public schools. At nearly one in six schools, such an act would be the single largest attack on public education in the city's history.

Filed last July, the charges assert that Brown used her two private management firms, Cynwyd Group and AcademicQuest, to channel funds from the charters. According to court records, roughly $5.6 million of the total $6.7 million was transferred from Agora to Cynwyd between 2007 and 2009 under the pretext of a "management contract." Anthony Kyriakakis of the US Attorney's Office stated, "The new indictment includes charges related to a wire fraud scheme by Dr. Brown and Dr. Chalker, and it alleges that they caused the Laboratory Charter School to pay approximately $214,000 in compensation to them they were not entitled to receive."

The Attorney's Office goes on to state that in setting up the payments, Brown and Chalker, the CEO of Planet Abacus, created "false documents, including false board meeting minutes and fabricated contracts to falsely make it appear as if the boards of the schools had held meetings to discuss and authorize contracts with Brown's private companies." For their part, Slade, Brown's grandnephew, and Knight have been accused of fabricating board resolutions at Laboratory and Ad Prima, another one of Brown's charter startups, to aid her embezzlement schemes.

Philadelphia has one of the most charterized student populations in the country, with roughly 40 percent of the city's kids enrolled in more than 80 charter schools. Publicly funded, yet privately run, the lack of oversight creates the possibility of rampant corruption among administrators.

Similar findings of charter school embezzlement have occurred across the country. Last month, the *Washington Examiner* noted the case of Monique Murdock, owner of the southeast-District of Columbia-based Nia Community Public Charter School. Murdock is charged with writing nearly $30,000 in personal checks from city funds. The findings come in the wake of the announcement of the closure of nearly one in ten public schools in the District of Columbia, many of which will fall upon the most impoverished layers of the city.

Charters themselves are plagued with inequality. The Office of Charter Schools, which oversees the district's charters, found that 18 such facilities impose "significant barriers to entry" on families. This included, in some cases, limiting the acceptance of applications only to occur during open houses held in upscale country clubs, inaccessible to working class families who rely on public transportation.

A 2011 study by the Education Law Center found that applicants to Philadelphia's charters were asked questions pertaining to their citizenship and disability status. These requirements, decidedly illegal, were

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employed in order to eliminate students with special needs from the rolls. Notably, Brown's Planet Abacus and Laboratory schools were listed as having only three students between the two receiving special education services.

The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), which operates several charters in the District of Columbia and Philadelphia, has been implicated in attempts to eliminate children with special needs from its rolls. A study in 2011 put out by Western Michigan University found that, on average, KIPP schools manage less than half the number of disabled and English as a Second Language (ESL) students as are in traditional public schools.

Promoted by President Barack Obama in tandem with the Race to the Top (RTTT) program, charters are touted as providing parents and students with greater "choice." In fact, the schools are connected to the continuing push for the elimination of public education. Schools are required to administer standardized testing and merit-pay schemes for teachers in an attempt to get cash-strapped districts to compete for a pittance of federal funding. Failure to meet such requirements results in a school being shut down or being turned into a charter.

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