



**Albany Preparatory Charter School**  
*Small School. Big Difference.*

February 26, 2010

TO: The Albany Prep Community

FROM: Brian Backstrom  
Chairman, Board of Trustees

SUBJECT: Recent News Coverage of Albany Prep

---

A recent editorial in the Albany Times Union called for accountability in charter schools, mentioning that I as Chairman of Albany Prep, and thus our school, somehow is resistant to this.

I'll admit that I scratched my head a bit over this one.

Of course charter schools should be highly accountable – that's one of the central factors that make these public schools so different from, and so much better than, typical district schools. I have always accepted this high level of accountability completely, and it's how I and the rest of the Board of Trustees have governed Albany Prep since its inception.

It is unfortunate that the Times Union editorial writers failed to contact me – or anyone at the school – to get the facts straight before trying to call me and the school to task.

The editorial (available at [www.timesunion.com/AspStories/story.asp?storyID=904099&category=OPINION](http://www.timesunion.com/AspStories/story.asp?storyID=904099&category=OPINION)) built on a story the paper ran earlier that week and on a decision by the State University's Charter Schools Committee to put Albany Prep on a temporary term of probation. While the Times Union got a lot of very important things wrong, I think it is important to state clearly that we readily accept SUNY's decision to conduct whatever review or inspection necessary to ensure that our school is operating as it should, and seeks to continuously improve the way it does everything.

I feel that the public record needs to be set straight, too.

The Times Union makes a claim that the school screened-out special-education students in an attempt to boost its test scores in advance of the state's decision on whether to renew the school's charter. Obviously, this is a serious charge, and one that the article rightly says both charter school supporters and opponents should be offended by, if true. There is so much wrong with this claim, however, that I need a few paragraphs to address it.

First, academic results used to determine charter renewal recommendations measure progress over time, and the state examines test results for same-students cohorts that are in at least the school's second year. Thus, as a practical measure, renewal-determining state test results cannot be influenced either up or down by even a single student that was admitted or not admitted in 2008-09. Albany Prep's ranking as the top-performing public school in all of Albany (among both charters and district schools) in 6<sup>th</sup> grade English language arts, 7<sup>th</sup> grade math, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade math is the result of hard work by the school's students and teachers, not anything else.

Second, let's look at the school's special education population. Examining the disabilities Albany Prep accommodates and the grades it serves, the school enrolls a greater percentage of students with special needs than does the district for those same grades and disabilities (10.3% to 9.8% overall; 20.0% to 6.5% in 5<sup>th</sup> grade alone [2008-09]). Clearly, there is not an issue of the school systematically turning away students with special needs.

Should the school serve even more students with special education needs? Should it serve even more classifications of disabilities than it does? Legitimate questions, and ones that would require state policy changes to address successfully. Let Albany's charter schools band together in a consortium to provide special education services, allowing schools to share strengths and resources (a practice currently prohibited). Allow Albany's charter schools to contract with BOCES to provide various specialty services, just as area districts do (another prohibited practice). When this happens, watch how charter schools step in and start better serving students with special needs as they already do students from low-income families.

The enrollment processing of special education children hyped in the editorial involved one student, not some school-wide systemic problem as portrayed. And what was school board's response in that single instance? If a question could be raised surrounding the enrollment of even a single student, it means that the process needed to be reformed. And so reformed it was.

Third, the editorial falsely portrayed that the school was attempting to deny admission to some students by putting them on a waiting list while there were empty seats at the school. But here's the real story on that one: primarily for staffing reasons, the school maintains internal enrollment targets for each grade level. If we want three sections of 5<sup>th</sup> grade at 25 students each, our enrollment target is set at 75 for that grade level; if we want two sections at 8<sup>th</sup> grade, our target there is 50 students. By August before the 2008-09 school year, Albany Prep was maxed-out on enrollment slots for 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades. Anyone applying for admission to those grade levels would be put on a waiting list, since those grades were full. In 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the school was significantly under-enrolled, with room for something like 50 more students. Was the school short of its total enrollment target? Yes, but it was set up to accept only more applying 5<sup>th</sup> graders. There was nothing nefarious going on here, we simply had too few 5<sup>th</sup> graders applying to the school and more than we could handle applying for 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

But let's get down to the important stuff.

While the facts paint a very different picture of Albany Prep than does the Times Union and its editorial writers, I hold firmly to one critical point: **there shouldn't be any procedure, any policy, or any practice at our school about which a single ethical question can be raised.**

When questions arose about administrative practices at Albany Prep last school year, I personally and promptly notified the State University's Charter Schools Institute, the authorizer responsible for oversight of the school, so it could investigate the claims. I also immediately began the board's own complete and thorough review of the issues involved, and developed and implemented a comprehensive action plan for reform. All of this was then shared with the Charter Schools Institute. The Institute's own independent review confirmed the findings of the board and indicated its agreement with the reform steps we took.

The board of the school acted appropriately. It acted swiftly. It acted decisively. And the State University did, too. That's what accountability is all about.