

NEWS & POLITICS

Some Minnesota charter school leaders break rules to benefit themselves and avoid scrutiny

More than half of the schools reviewed by regulators in the past five years flunked governance standards. Many violated the state's Open Meeting Law.

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The Minnesota Star Tribune

APRIL 19, 2025 AT 7:30AM



The exterior of Athlos Academy of St. Cloud seen on April 3. (Jerry Holt/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

This is the last investigation in an occasional series by the Minnesota Star Tribune in 2024 and 2025 on oversight issues of Minnesota charter schools.

Charter schools receive more than \$1 billion a year from taxpayers, but the people who run and oversee these schools often act more like members of a private club than stewards of a public school, according to a Minnesota Star Tribune review of recently released records from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE).

Administrators have put family members and other insiders on the payroll despite hiring rules and conflict-of-interest provisions set up by regulators that prohibit such arrangements.

Parents and teachers have been barred from speaking at public school board meetings, and staff members who have complained about their treatment have been publicly embarrassed.

Board members at multiple schools have gone into closed session to negotiate contracts with school leaders in violation of the state's Open Meeting Law, while many leaders have gotten their contracts extended without going through any of the required reviews.

School board elections have been conducted without proper notice, resulting in few voters and sometimes no challengers to incumbents who have been in power for years.

Altogether, 53 of 91 compliance reviews conducted in the past five years documented significant governance problems in Minnesota's charter school sector, with 18 of those reviews turning up repeat violations, according to a Star Tribune review of contract evaluations conducted by nonprofits that regulate charter schools on behalf of the state.

Thirty-two of those schools were cited for open meeting violations, including one school that held all of its board meetings virtually and another that locked its doors during board meetings, preventing the public from attending. State law requires most public entities' meetings to be open to the public, except in limited cases.

Don Gemberling, former director of the state's Data Practices Office, said the Star Tribune's research – part of a broader yearlong investigation into the lack of oversight in charter schools – indicates that charter schools are breaking the rules more often than traditional public schools, perhaps because charters were originally exempted from the Open Meeting Law.

“To me, it's indefensible,” said Gemberling, who is now spokesman for the nonprofit Minnesotans for Open Government. “The open meetings law is not that complicated. After all these years, they ought to be able to do what they are supposed to do.”

Governance problems have been linked to the failure of dozens of charter schools in Minnesota. In 2024, nine of the 181 charter schools operating in the state at the beginning

of the year closed, the most since the first charter school failure in 1996, state records show. Another 10 charter schools were threatened with the loss of their contract by their state-approved authorizers in the past year.

The state does not require school leaders to hold an administrative license, which means many charter schools have been run by inexperienced administrators and overseen by unqualified board members who routinely rubber-stamp bad decisions.

Moreover, the nonprofits who oversee charters are required to give school leaders wide latitude over how they operate, which means some authorizers won't intervene unless a school is on the brink of disaster.

In January, Cannon River STEM School – which has been repeatedly cited for governance failures and other contract violations since 2017 – was told by its authorizer that the southern Minnesota school's problems were so severe its charter would not be renewed when its contract expires this June.

Among the school's problems: a 35% drop in enrollment and the near depletion of the school's fund balance, the most important indicator of a school's financial health.

“Due to ... the Board of Directors' failure to effectively govern, the school does not have a clear future path toward viability,” Erin Anderson, director of the charter school's authorizer, Osprey Wilds, wrote in a Jan. 13 letter to the school.

Cannon River STEM School leaders did not respond to requests for comment.

State officials have taken notice of the problems. In February, the University of Minnesota was awarded up to \$450,000 by the Education Department to evaluate why poor governance has been so “persistent” among charter schools. The study will take one to three years and provide reform proposals to state officials, records show.

“We recognize that governance challenges are not isolated,” Osprey Wilds said in a written response to the Star Tribune. “They often reflect broader systemic issues in charter board recruitment, training, and capacity—concerns that the Legislature and MDE have also acknowledged.”

‘That person who asked questions’ kicked off board

When board members aren't paying attention, charter school insiders can reward themselves and their friends handsomely, according to state records.

At Hmong College Prep Academy in St. Paul, founder Christianna Hang gave her husband a \$1 million contract to provide services to the school in 2021, and board vice chair Jason Helgemoe steered a \$7 million transaction in 2020 to Northeast Bank, where he was a vice president, according to the findings of a 2021 investigation of the school by MDE.

Hang resigned and her husband's contract was canceled after MDE flagged the conflict-of-interest violations, and she was later sued by the state attorney general for losing more than \$4 million in school money by investing in a hedge fund.

Helgemoe, who resigned from the school board, didn't return calls for comment. Mark Ethen, chief credit officer at Northeast, said Helgemoe should have recused himself from the school board vote on the bank deal, but he said Helgemoe did not personally negotiate the transaction or benefit financially from the deal. He declined to say if Helgemoe was disciplined by the bank.

At other charters, school boards have abused their authority by strong-arming critics and conducting important school business in private, according to evaluations and complaints filed with MDE. Board members who spoke up said they were punished and in some cases even removed from the boards.

Attorney Jeffrey Eng, who served on the board at Math and Science Academy in Woodbury, said he was improperly removed from the board in 2023 after he publicly questioned the removal of the school's executive director and the hiring of a replacement, among other issues.

"I became known as that person who asked questions, which became an issue and why I was removed. Nobody wanted to answer those questions," said Eng, past president of the Hennepin County Bar Association.

Though the school's authorizer, Student Achievement Minnesota, found that Eng's removal was legal, an investigator hired by the nonprofit later documented widespread problems, including the improper hiring of a new executive director. The investigator concluded the school's governance was "dysfunctional and does not operate to the benefit of the students."

School leaders embraced the report. At a charter school leadership conference last year, Math and Science Academy was touted for transforming its governance, which required the resignation or removal of five board members and semiannual retreats where board members receive additional training.

“We are very proud of the governance work that we have done over the last two years,” said Kate Hinton, the school’s executive director.

At Urban Academy in St. Paul, the first board elections in at least five years are being held in May after an employee filed a complaint with the state, accusing school leaders of “hand-picking board members” instead of opening the seats to other potential candidates. Typically, charter schools hold elections each year to fill expiring seats.

In a response to the Star Tribune’s questions, Urban chair Melissa Jensen said board members kept extending their terms because nobody else expressed interest in the seats.

In a November 2024 letter to the school, MDE said its investigation showed that Urban failed to meet its legal obligations by making “minimal” efforts to encourage board membership. The department ordered new elections and told the school to make sure it prominently promoted the election on its website.

Jensen, who has led the board for more than a decade, declined to say how many candidates emerged for the two open seats.

School closed without a public hearing

Charter school leaders aren’t the only culprits when it comes to a lack of transparency.

In February, when leaders of Athlos Academy in St. Cloud were fighting for the survival of their school, their authorizer refused to allow testimony from any parents, students or staff members. Instead, the hearing was closed to the public.

Heather Ebnet, who spent 21 years working in the St. Cloud public school system before becoming the executive director of Athlos Academy last summer, said the witness restrictions were “super unfair” and ultimately impossible to overcome.

The school’s authorizer, Volunteers of America-Minnesota, notified Ebnet in February that Athlos Academy’s contract will not be renewed when it expires in June. That means the school will close at the end of the school year in May.

“Our parents didn’t get a chance to have their voices heard,” said Ebnet, who received more than 100 letters of support from parents who wanted the school to remain open. “They are broken. When we told the kids what was happening here it was like we were having a funeral. It was awful.”

Gemberling said he's never heard of a case in which a public school was closed without a public hearing.

"It's terrible," Gemberling said. "It reinforces the idea that you shouldn't trust the government because they really don't care about real people."

VOA is the only authorizer out of 12 in Minnesota that bars members of the public from attending a revocation hearing, according to a Star Tribune survey. Under state law, authorizers are free to establish their own oversight framework.

"We have never refused anyone from attending a hearing," said Beth Topoluk, executive director of Friends of Education, which oversees many of the state's top-performing charters. "The hearing is the school's opportunity to convince the authorizer to renew or continue the charter, and what information the school presents at the hearing is entirely the decision of the school."

Ebnet said VOA failed to offer her any guidance for preparing for the hearing, forcing her to reach out to other authorizers.

In a written response to questions, VOA-Minnesota spokesperson Julia Donaldson said the nonprofit does not "tailor informal hearing formats based on individual circumstances." Moreover, she said VOA's actions were consistent with state law, saying there are no requirements for such hearings to be open to the public.

"The informal hearing format was designed to ensure clarity, efficiency and procedural integrity," Donaldson said in the statement. "The intent of the hearing was to focus on those most directly responsible for the school's day-to-day operations and performance."

VOA is not the only authorizer to shield its oversight activities from the public. Last fall, [10 nonprofits refused requests](#) from the Star Tribune for documents showing how they handle contract violations by the schools they supervise, arguing that they are private organizations not subject to the state law requiring disclosure of all public records.

State Sen. Steve A. Cwodzinski, DFL-Eden Prairie, introduced a bill this year that would require all authorizers to comply with the state's public records law, but the bill has not moved forward and is not part of an education omnibus bill that includes other charter school reforms.

The charter school evaluations that the Minnesota Star Tribune obtained from the Minnesota Department of Education for this story are available for you to [read and search through](#). There are often multiple documents for each charter school. Click on the label on the

right called “Most Recent” to only see the most recent evaluation for each school. In most cases, the evaluation is included in the same document as a contract, which might be hundreds of pages long, and you may have to scroll to the end of the contract before you’ll find the evaluation.

Correction: *This story has been updated to include Minnesotans for Open Government's current name.*

