**Headline:** How Charter Schools Promote ‘Development Off the Backs of Children’

**Teaser:** When charter schools are used as “a tool for economic development,” kids and communities suffer.

By Jeff Bryant

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**[Article Body:]**

Marta Bulaich didn’t notice the charter school that abutted her rental property in Watsonville, California, until she saw children scaling the 12-foot fence surrounding her backyard to retrieve wayward balls they had misdirected onto her property.

“I decided this is really not safe,” said Bulaich, a native of Watsonville who no longer lives there but has family and business ties to the community. When she began looking into the whole situation with the charter school’s location, there was a lot that concerned her.

She knew the school—[CEIBA College Preparatory Academy](https://www.ceibaschools.org/), a 500-student, grade 6 to 12 school—was located in an industrial zone in the center of the city, in a building that had once been a storage center for Nordic Naturals, a vitamin and supplements company, and a facility for [DHL International](https://www.dhl.com/us-en/home.html), the shipping company. The school moved from downtown Watsonville to the building in [2013](https://www.santacruzsentinel.com/2023/02/27/watsonville-city-council-to-consider-making-ceibas-campus-permanent/), according to the Santa Cruz Sentinel, located in a state-approved “[enterprise zone](https://calbudgetcenter.org/app/uploads/0604_ezreport.pdf)” that had been created to [incentivize business development with tax savings](https://www.kbkg.com/watsonville-enterprise-zone).

The school sits between a busy distribution center for [Golden Brands](https://goldenbrands.com/), a beverage company in Monterey Bay—a subsidiary of [Reyes Beverage Group](https://reyesbeveragegroup.com/), the [largest beer distributor in America](https://reyesbeveragegroup.com/about)—and a toxic site, where CEIBA plans to expand, which was formerly a pesticide manufacturing plant operated by the petrochemical company [Chevron](https://www.chevron.com/), said Bulaich. High-voltage power transmission lines run along the school’s Locust Street address.

But what concerned Bulaich the most was how students came and went from the campus. In 2019, two CEIBA students walking to school were hit by a van and had to be “[airlifted](https://www.ksbw.com/article/2-watsonville-students-hit-by-van-walking-to-school/30198768)” out of the community to receive medical attention, local television station KSBW reported. According to Bulaich, the students were hit while traversing a “noncompliant crosswalk” that connects to nearby railroad tracks on Walker Street, a congested access point to the school that also has a truck transit route.

The school’s front door is steps away from [State Highway 129](https://www.google.com/maps/search/watsonville%2Bceiba%2Bcharter%2Bschool%2Bopens/%4036.9047102%2C-121.7601979%2C18z?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI1MDUwNy4wIKXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D), a major thoroughfare with a 45-mile-per-hour speed limit, and one of the school’s entryways connecting to the highway is shared with Golden Brands. A [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3m6wKwWewg4) posted on YouTube shows just how harrowing this stretch of highway is and how buses that serve the school pick up and drop off students at the entryway that the school shares with the beer distributor.

According to detailed evidence submitted in a lawsuit filed against CEIBA and the City of Watsonville in 2023—including documentation showing defects of the traffic analysis done before CEIBA moved to its current location, which Our Schools examined—half the students who attend the charter school “walk or bike to school every day,” and “[n]early all of CEIBA students must cross a railroad to get to school, whether by motor vehicle, bicycle, or walking.”

Walker Street, where the students were hit, “has five railroad crossings, four of which are within 1,500 feet of CEIBA’s campus,” stated the lawsuit filed by Bulaich and Watsonville Environmental Safety Traffic Industrial Alliance, a group of Watsonville residents who live near the charter.

Among the evidence making up the suit are numerous photographs of CEIBA students on their way to school, often wearing headsets or staring into their phones, casually traversing active railroad crossings and busy intersections trafficked by semi tractor-trailer trucks.

Other photographs depict parents dropping off and picking up students along the highway and at busy intersections, often with no visible crosswalks, where tractor-trailers are maneuvering around difficult turns. A letter from an attorney called attention to “a dangerous condition on Highway 129,” especially witnessed during “the morning and afternoon drop-off and pick-up times, [when] long lines of cars jockey for limited parking spaces… often stretching for over two city blocks.”

The former Chevron property that CEIBA purchased and plans to build on is described as “one of Watsonville’s most known toxic sites… [former] home to one of the world’s largest chemical pesticide-producing facilities, Ortho California Chemical Spray Company, which pulverized lead, arsenic, and strychnine in its manufacturing operations.”

The suit alleges, “CEIBA was permitted to establish its educational facility within an industrial-zoned district, situated distant from the residential zone centers of the city, where the majority of its student population resided. Any students walking or bicycling to school and back home would be traversing railway lines, a highway, heavy truck routes, industrial loading areas, and high-power transmission lines. Access to the school site was structured through a driveway on a crowded, narrow street adjacent to industrial uses.”

Another revelation to Bulaich was that Watsonville was not the only place where charter school locations have posed environmental and safety challenges to a community. “We didn’t realize this local issue is really a national story,” she said.

As the number of charter schools [has continued to expand](https://www.spglobal.com/ratings/en/research/articles/250122-u-s-charter-schools-2025-outlook-stability-for-now-with-pockets-of-pressure-13387874) nationwide, in many states, there is often very loose government oversight about where they show up, and families and residents living near these schools are left to grapple with the many [adverse consequences](https://observatory.wiki/Why_Charter_Schools_Open_Where_They_Do%E2%80%94And_Why_That%E2%80%99s_a_Problem) that crop up when these schools start and expand in their communities.

**‘Communities Versus Big Business’**

On the other side of the country, in Riverhead, at the base of the north and south forks of Long Island in New York, there are similar concerns about where a charter school can locate in a community.

Long Island, hemmed in by the Long Island Sound to the north and the Atlantic Ocean to the south, is a long and skinny spit of land where real estate is finite and considered a premium. “On an island,” Gregory Wallace explained to Our Schools, “if there’s anything that people care about, it’s open space and traffic.” Wallace is president of the Riverhead Central Faculty Association, the local affiliate of [New York State United Teachers](https://www.nysut.org/).

So, in 2023, when [word got out](https://behindthehedges.com/riverhead-charter-school-to-buy-aquebogue-farm/) that a local charter, [Riverhead Charter School](https://riverheadcharterschool.org/), had acquired land to build a new high school and athletic fields, it drew immediate scrutiny from locals. The charter wanted to build on more than 70 acres of land located in an “[agricultural protection zoning district](https://patch.com/new-york/riverhead/crowd-packs-town-hall-heated-charter-school-expansion-debate),” according to the local news network Patch. This meant the school had to apply to the town for a special use permit to build on land that, since the 1990s, had been [operated](https://behindthehedges.com/riverhead-charter-school-to-buy-aquebogue-farm/) by a family as a sod farm.

On the night of the rezoning hearing, in February 2024, a crowd “[packed](https://patch.com/new-york/riverhead/crowd-packs-town-hall-heated-charter-school-expansion-debate)” Riverhead Town Hall, according to Patch, to speak for and against the plan. During the same month, Riverhead Local [stated](https://riverheadlocal.com/2024/02/13/residents-organize-against-riverhead-charter-school-plan-for-new-high-school-on-sound-avenue/) that some of the residents near the proposed new school organized to oppose it, started a Facebook page and petition campaign against it, and printed and distributed yard signs voicing their concerns about heavy traffic and vanishing open spaces that the charter would intensify.

Faced with such strident opposition, the charter school’s president announced in March that it was dropping its plan to build the school on the open farmland, [reported](https://riverheadlocal.com/2024/03/19/facing-stiff-opposition-riverhead-charter-school-drops-plans-for-sound-avenue-farmland/) Riverhead Local. Yet, two months later, Riverhead Town Hall was packed again, [according to](https://riverheadlocal.com/2024/05/21/speakers-opposing-private-schools-on-industrial-land-dominate-comp-plan-hearing/) Riverhead Local, with another crowd opposing the charter school’s alternative plan to build its new school in an industrial zone. This time, the complaints were more about economics.

The industrial zone was formed by the state’s industrial development agency, according to Wallace, to incentivize developers to start new businesses and spur job growth, which would generate new tax revenue for funding the local schools. “Here, there was a proposal to turn more than 40 acres of land into a charter school, take that land off the tax roll permanently, and give it to an operation that actively siphons money away from the local schools,” he said. Charter schools receive funding from the local school district when students transfer out of the public school to the charter. Also, public school districts in New York, in most cases, pick up the tab for [transportation](https://publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Transportation-Policy-Snapshot_final.pdf) and [nursing](https://www.nysed.gov/nonpublic-schools/health-services) costs for charter schools.

Due to pressure from the public, the Riverhead Town Council, which had initially supported the plan to accommodate charters in the industrial zone, nixed that option too, Riverhead News Review [reported](https://riverheadnewsreview.timesreview.com/2024/06/120606/riverhead-town-board-retracts-plan-to-allow-charter-school-build-on-industrial-land/) in June 2024.

In reflecting on the success of the two campaigns to keep a charter school from acquiring more land—first farmland, then industrial area land—Wallace said, “This is not a Republican or Democrat issue. This is an issue of communities versus big business.”

**‘A Tool for Economic Development’**

Despite the supposed popularity of charter schools, opposition to locating them in places where local communities do not want them is common.

In the West Contra Costa Unified School District in California, there was an [influx](https://www.oaklandmagazine.com/charter-schools-checked-in-richmond/) of 14 new charter schools between 2013 and 2018. This led grassroots activists to organize a campaign to call attention to the many problems that arise when these schools suddenly show up. At least one of the citizen groups, the Richmond Progressive Alliance, made the campaign about local economic issues, [noting](https://www.richmondprogressivealliance.net/city_moratorium_on_new_charter_school_facilities), “Many of these charters are locating in mixed-use zoning areas that are not meant for schools, but rather for commercial activities that generate tax revenue and provide employment.”

“[D]espite their growth, charter schools remain highly controversial in the district,” [reported](https://www.oaklandmagazine.com/charter-schools-checked-in-richmond/) Oakland Magazine in 2018, “with application hearings drawing protests at school board meetings.” Spurred by this opposition, the Richmond City Council, located in the district, enacted a seven-month “moratorium on building any new school sites in commercial zones.”

Also in California, “[p]arking, traffic, safety, and the loss of zones where industrial businesses can operate” were big concerns when a new Rocketship charter school wanted to locate in Redwood City, the Daily Journal [stated](https://www.smdailyjournal.com/news/local/charter-school-ok-d-amid-traffic-safety-concerns-redwood-city-officials-waver-on-whether-industrial/article_226865ea-c84f-528a-b488-c453f997b2ba.html) in 2017. The article quoted a nearby business owner who said that around 40 trucks leave the area each morning. She expressed concerns about “who would be responsible for the safety of the children expected to walk to school in the morning and afternoon since the trucks she uses for her business traverse the… sidewalk students would use.”

In 2011, Boyle Heights Beat, a neighborhood news outlet in Los Angeles, [reported](https://boyleheightsbeat.com/new-arts-charter-school-to-open-in-boyle-heights-this-fall/) about a new charter school’s “unconventional site, where a partially covered parking lot will serve as a playground. Inside the strip mall that is the school’s first home, an immigration processing office, a community adult school, and a bus terminal surround the school. Outside, is a busy business district where trucks and trailers follow their route into a nearby industrial zone.”

In Jacksonville, Florida, the Jaxson magazine [reported](https://www.thejaxsonmag.com/article/construction-underway-on-urban-charter-school) in 2019 about “a developer” wanting to “transform” one of the “most contaminated” sites in the community with a new charter school. The new school, according to the developer, “will erase a highly visible brownfield site where the City of Jacksonville operated the Forest Street Incinerator,” the magazine reported.

In Allentown, Pennsylvania, in 2023, “Council members… unanimously rejected the Lehigh Valley STEAM Academy Charter School’s bid to amend the city’s zoning ordinances to allow schools to open in areas zoned for limited and general industrial uses,” Lehigh Valley News [stated](https://www.lehighvalleynews.com/allentown/allentown-officials-reject-charter-schools-bid-to-open-in-industrial-zone). “School district officials fought the proposal throughout the city’s zoning-approval process.”

St. Louis Public Radio [reported](https://www.stlpr.org/education/2018-10-09/finding-a-suitable-schoolhouse-in-st-louis-can-be-the-real-snag-for-charter-schools) in 2018 that “[m]ore than a dozen charter schools” in the city “have ended up in old industrial warehouses or former office space,” despite the school district having [scores of abandoned school buildings](https://nextstl.com/2024/11/an-inventory-of-70-former-public-school-buildings-in-stl/) it is trying to sell or redevelop.

In 2023, when a charter school in Westerville, Ohio, tried to locate in an empty office building in an industrial zone, opponents raised concerns over traffic, [according to](https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/education/2023/03/21/k-8-charter-school-proposed-for-westerville-office-building/70032748007/) the Columbus Dispatch. Responding to the opposition, the local planning commission ultimately [rejected](https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/commentary/local-bureaucrats-should-stop-standing-way-charter-schools-seeking-facilities) the school.

In Arizona, state “statutes specifically allow charter schools to be located and operated at locations or facilities in zoning classifications that would have otherwise prevented a charter school,” [reported](https://azbigmedia.com/real-estate/charter-school-zoning-arizona-tool-economic-development/) AZ Big Media in 2017. “This allows charter schools to largely bypass the hassles related to acquiring zoning-friendly properties,” noted the article, which called charter schools “a tool for economic development.”

**‘Promoting Development Off the Backs of Children’**

Sometimes, there are similar complaints about traffic, noise, pollution, safety, and economics when public school districts need to build new schools. But public school advocates note that when public schools want to expand and add new buildings, those decisions are generally made in government-regulated proceedings that include public hearings and community stakeholder participation. And the economics have to make sense to voters who ultimately have the power to vote for or against local officials who make the decisions.

Charter schools, on the other hand, often operate more like private businesses, [choosing locations](https://www.laprogressive.com/education-reform/charter-schools-2-3) based on [market analyses](https://edpolitics.org/education-101-dont-open-a-new-charter-school-in-the-middle-of-a-pandemic/) and financial proformas that need not be revealed to the public. Even when government review boards or charter authorizers are involved in approving the schools, their deliberations tend to [accept whatever criteria the charter organization provides](https://www.alternet.org/2016/12/north-carolinas-charter-school-industry-slowly-gutting-public-education) for locating a school—or even approve schools that have [yet to find a location](https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/07/10/why-wont-charter-school-industry-acknowledge-its-documented-failures).

CEIBA charter school in Watsonville was started with $1 million in seed money donated by Reed Hastings, the co-founder of Netflix and a Stanford-educated billionaire, [according to](https://www.santacruzsentinel.com/2008/08/12/watsonville-council-has-final-say-on-charter-schools-new-home/) the Santa Cruz Sentinel. “The idea was to open schools modeled on the successful Pacific Collegiate School in Santa Cruz,” a charter school that Hastings [helped start](http://peacecorpsonline.org/messages/messages/467/2031554.html).

Meanwhile, the president of the Riverhead Charter School board, David Edwards, is from Los Angeles, according to his LinkedIn [page](https://www.linkedin.com/in/davidlaedwards/). “So we have someone from Los Angeles deciding what is being done with our tax dollars,” said Wallace, “and we have no say over it.”

Also, just like businesses, charter schools often use complicated local zoning laws to take advantage of tax incentives or to lower start-up and operation costs. “Zoning is a very nefarious weapon that charter schools and their supporters in local government can use,” Bulaich said, “especially because it’s complicated and most people don’t understand it.”

What frustrates public school advocates even more is when local municipal and school district officials collude with charter operators.

In Watsonville, “City officials worked out the land deal with the charter schools,” said Bulaich, “because the city wants to eventually get rid of the industrial zone, even though it’s a great source of economic vitality and jobs.”

The lawsuit she joined contends that the permit the City of Watsonville (CoW) granted to the school to allow it to operate in the industrial zone was “predicated on falsified zoning administration” and incorrectly classified “children’s schools as a permitted use within an industrial-zoned district,” which was “in direct violation of the CoW’s own zoning ordinance.”

The city waived an environmental review required by state law, and the school district “either lost or destroyed relevant public documents concerning the hazardous siting of CEIBA within a heavy industrial zone.” The city, the school district, and the charter school “omitted mention of railroads in documentation, staff reports, traffic studies, public recital, [and] safety studies used to approve operations of CEIBA,” the lawsuit stated.

In Riverhead, “local town government is now clearly assisting the charter school,” said Wallace. “The town wants the charter school so they can tell folks they have a choice and to make the town more desirable for other developers to come in and buy real estate.” But there are real costs that this development initiative poses to local public schools, he maintained.

“Riverhead public schools have [nearly] a $212 million budget, and… [in 2025], $16 million is going to pay for the costs of charters. So, as charter schools expand, they deplete our resources. For every student who attends, we are charged $24,000, less than our per-pupil average costs, which are higher because of the high numbers of special ed students we serve. But it feeds the myth that charters educate students for less money. This thinking ignores that the public is paying for two parallel services.”

That thinking also ignores that the charter school is only serving 13 percent of the students in the community, Wallace noted. “So to better serve the charter, the town is undermining the school system that is serving 87 percent of the students in the community.”

 “Some might say the trade-off for whatever new development the charter attracts will be worth it, but it seems to me that any trade-off posing [real estate development] against children’s access to a free public education is a false equivalency. It seems you’re promoting development off the backs of children.”