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Former ODE Charter School Office consultant Denis Smith, in a commentary in the [Ohio Capital Journal](#) explains how and why Ohio charter schools were labeled “community schools” in Ohio law.

Charter schools are charter schools, not community schools. Charter schools operate by a state-issued charter, which exempts them from many of the rules, regulations, standards, and responsibilities associated with geographic community-based, community-operated, constitutionally authorized public common schools. In most cases, Ohio charter schools are the antithesis of community schools. So how and why did Ohio charter schools get labeled as community schools? Denis Smith explains.

What’s in a name? Ohio General Assembly, watch your language when it comes to “community” schools

[DENIS SMITH](#)

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More than a quarter-century ago, in a move that undermined the status of the state’s public schools, Ohio Republicans approved legislation that authorized the use of public funds to operate schools run by private management companies. These entities that use public funds to establish and maintain a parallel system of education are called charter schools.

Except in one state, where the legal title for these schools may be an issue that is bound to confuse both policy makers and the public over time.

Indeed, in this nation 44 of the states refer by law to these public-private hybrids as charter schools. Sadly, the [Ohio Revised Code](#) calls them something else, community schools. That poor choice of language terminology, an awkward construction from the very beginning of Ohio school privatization, may now pose a problem and continuing confusion as the result of legislation in the U.S. Senate that will expand the existing federal community school program.

That’s right, the federal full-service community school program.

On Nov. 29, Ohio U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown introduced the [Full-Service Community School Expansion Act of 2023](#) in the U.S. Senate. The legislation seeks to increase the number of school districts and schools in the federally-funded community school program, which shares the same title with the hybrid schools in Ohio but otherwise has no resemblance.

What policy experts define as a full-service community school was codified in 1991, when Florida legislation defined such an [educational program](#) as “the integration of educational, medical, and social and or human services that meets the needs of youth and their families on school grounds or in easily accessible locations.” Indeed, the basic idea of a community school and the terminology for it predated the Ohio legislation that renamed charters as community schools. More on that later.

The initial legislation that established the FSCS program defined the [“four pillars of a community school”](#) as having integrated support for students from health and social service agencies, an expanded instructional day for added learning opportunities, community engagement, and collaboration by the school leadership with community service providers.

The federal definition of a community school is instructive, where the school day is extended to enhance learning, and where community organizations provide dental, vision, nutrition, and other key services to help children thrive and be successful in their school experience. If it has been said that it takes a village to raise a child. But it also takes a community to educate a child through public participation in providing the care and support for those who are the future.

This idea of a community school, now defined in federal law, complements the historical image of the little red schoolhouse, which has served as the center of the community since the early days of the republic. In fact, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 required that a portion of the land in new territories be set aside to support the establishment and funding of public schools. It is also fitting to know that Ohio was the first state to be formed from the Northwest Territory in 1803.

With this historical background and the federal legislation that defines a community school, let’s compare the federal concept of a community school with what is called a “community school” in Ohio.

In 1997, the legislature established in the Ohio Revised Code [Chapter 3314- Community Schools](#), a strange entity that is a hybrid of public funds received by private management companies to educate students. But the problem with these “community schools” is that they are neither of the community nor public in their structure.

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As an example, the very idea of a national charter school chain operating multiple schools, whose headquarters may be elsewhere, where its board members sit on the governing bodies of several schools and may not be residents of the communities where the schools are located, is antithetical to the concept of a community school.

So we are back to a contradiction in terms that needs to be addressed. Of all the 45 states that have chosen to operate publicly funded but privately operated schools, Ohio has chosen to use the term “community school” in law when these schools are anything but.

And the reason? You shouldn’t be surprised to know that in this state of gerrymandering and supermajorities, it’s all about politics. Here’s why.

About 15 years ago, a former Republican legislator told a colleague who worked with me in the Ohio Department of Education’s Community (Charter) School Office that there was a concern the initial legislation would not have passed in 1997 if the word charter was used. Community was a “word that sells,” it was thought back then. To this day, it appears that Ohio is the only state which uses such unique language to describe these schools, where community replaces the term charter and sponsor replaces another key term, that of authorizer.

In light of the confusion that will only grow as *real* community schools continue to develop, public schools with extended-learning formats and support programs provided by collaborating community organizations governed by elected and not appointed community members, it’s time for the legislature to do the right thing and amend Chapter 3314 of the Ohio Revised Code. To put it bluntly, and in light of prevailing federal definitions as found in the Full-Service Community School Program, Ohio community schools are not and cannot be identified as community schools.

Conclusion: Ohio politicians, watch your language. Real community schools, particularly the full-service variety and not charters masquerading as such, are the real thing. Thank you, Senator Brown, for your precise use of language in sponsoring this valuable program and advocacy for community schools. After all, it takes a community to govern, oversee, and support a school, a real community school, that belongs to all of us, and not a national chain or profit-centered business enterprise.