Utah Charter School Laws Need Clearer Accountability for Student Safety and School Siting

October 26, 2026

Dear Senators and Representatives,

On October 23, a group of concerned parents and community members from Mapleton met with representatives of the Louisa May Alcott Community School (LMACS), their financial advisors, and members of the State Charter School Board.

Some questions about the school's plans were answered. Many were deferred for future responses. At their core, our questions are simple: Why is adding a third school to the same small residential road the right choice? And what is being done to ensure the safety of children walking to and from these schools?

Throughout this process, we have repeatedly heard that the school is following the law. When we question the process, we are told that the law is what it is, and that changes must come from the state.

I propose we do just that.

Utah law requires coordination between schools and municipalities to mitigate traffic hazards and maximize student safety. Utah Code § 10-20-304 also limits a municipality's authority to regulate charter school development, allowing certain objective standards while restricting its ability to withhold approval.

But requiring collaboration and providing meaningful ways to verify that collaboration is achieving its intended purpose are two different things.

Our experience in Mapleton illustrates why that distinction matters.

LMACS evaluated two potential locations:

The first was along Main Street (SR-147), near 1600 South. This location offered access to major arterial routes connecting Mapleton, Spanish Fork, and surrounding communities. Families traveling from neighboring cities could approach via SR-51 and US-89, using established intersections controlled by traffic signals or a roundabout. Main Street and 1600 South are part of a developing transportation corridor, where improvements can be incorporated into the city's broader infrastructure planning. The location was also separated from existing schools.

The second, which the school selected, is on 1200 North, in a low-density agricultural neighborhood directly across from Hobble Creek Elementary School and just blocks from Mapleton Junior High.

Although classified as a collector road, 1200 North has many characteristics of a rural residential street. Families arriving from US-89 must navigate an awkward, stop-controlled T-intersection, then travel along a road that already serves two public schools. Along this route are intermittent sidewalks, open irrigation canals, limited shoulders, and few alternative connections. Expanding the road would require improvements through an established neighborhood, constrained by existing homes, canals, and property access.

The proposed school would also sit alongside the Mapleton walking trail, with vehicles exiting the property immediately adjacent to an existing pedestrian crossing.

These are fundamentally different transportation environments. One offers arterial connections in a developing corridor. The other concentrates additional school traffic along a constrained residential road already serving two schools, with children walking and cycling through areas that lack basic pedestrian infrastructure.

In conversations with the school board and others, I understand that suitable property within city limits has been difficult to find at an affordable price, and that the selected property became available at a lower cost. Construction deadlines and funding pressures also influenced the decision, while the selected location avoided some additional coordination associated with developing along a state highway.

I respect the effort these individuals have invested in creating new educational opportunities. But if cost, financing deadlines, and regulatory complexity make it difficult for a school board to reconsider a location when legitimate safety concerns arise, then the state should examine whether its own requirements are encouraging the wrong priorities.

The school has presented a traffic study and discussed possible measures such as staggered dismissal times, releasing students who walk before vehicle pickup begins, and potentially providing crossing guards.

I appreciate that these ideas are being considered. But **suggesting ways to manage traffic is not the same as demonstrating that children will be safe.** We have yet to see objective measures showing how pedestrian conflicts will be evaluated and mitigated, particularly when three schools are operating in close proximity.

The timeline makes this especially troubling.

Mapleton residents first received notice from the city dated October 1. Concerned residents attended the school's October 13 board meeting, but received few substantive answers. Two days later, more than 500 people had signed a community petition asking the school to reconsider its location.[1] Our first meaningful opportunity to engage directly with school representatives, review site plans, and discuss these concerns was October 23.

That was approximately one week before the scheduled property closing, and just over two months before Utah's January 1 construction-start deadline for a school planning to open in August 2027.

By the time our community was invited into the conversation, there was little practical opportunity left to influence the location.

Municipal governments are responsible for planning roads, sidewalks, pedestrian crossings, emergency access, and infrastructure improvements. Our local development process relies not only on written ordinances, but also on public participation, professional review, and the judgment of officials accountable to the people living with the consequences of their decisions.

Charter schools operate under a different framework. The current LMACS board members do not live in Mapleton, nor did the school seek meaningful input from affected residents before committing to the property. That does not mean the board is indifferent to our safety, but its members are not directly accountable to the people who live with the consequences of their decisions.

Meanwhile, our elected city officials remain responsible for local infrastructure and public safety, yet state law substantially restricts their authority over charter school development. The State Charter School Board has repeatedly said that site selection rests with the school's governing board and municipality.

1 View the community petition: KeepMapletonSafe.org/sign/

Who, then, has both the responsibility and the practical authority to intervene when a school board makes a legally permissible location decision that may inadequately protect children outside its property?

Utah recently transferred public school construction oversight to the Division of Facilities Construction and Management (DFCM). Under Utah Code § 63A-5b-1202, DFCM is specifically directed to establish standards for coordination with municipalities regarding school siting, traffic impacts, and site safety.

Yet the agency's public website continues to describe these rules as being developed, without providing a clearly identifiable set of new standards addressing these responsibilities. Its training and question-submission resources appear primarily directed toward school agencies and construction professionals, rather than the local government officials and community leaders responsible for managing the broader impacts of school development.

It remains unclear who is responsible for independently evaluating whether proposed traffic and pedestrian safety measures are sufficient, particularly when the hazards extend beyond the school's property. The law should not merely require collaboration. It should establish objective measures for evaluating safety and meaningful accountability when legitimate concerns remain unresolved.

I support school choice, and I am grateful for people willing to develop new educational opportunities for Utah families. **But school choice and student safety should never be competing priorities.**

As concerned residents, we are asking the Legislature to examine whether Utah's charter school laws provide adequate safeguards for school siting, pedestrian safety, and municipal accountability. In particular, we ask you to consider whether construction deadlines prioritize speed over thoughtful site selection, whether the state's rulemaking responsibilities are being fulfilled, and whether local officials have both the responsibility and practical authority to protect their communities.

I recognize that changing the law may come too late to influence the LMACS development. But we should not have to wait for a preventable tragedy to discover that everyone followed the law while no one had the authority to insist on a safer outcome.

We expect our schools and communities to work together in good faith, doing what is right even when it is less convenient. **We ask our lawmakers to hold themselves to that same standard. Establish meaningful safety requirements, restore practical authority to our local leaders, and ensure collaboration occurs while decisions can still be changed.**

Following the law should be the beginning of our responsibility to protect children, not the end of it.

Respectfully,

Jason Longhurst

Mapleton, Utah

For a list of concerned citizens who have read and endorsed this letter, visit KeepMapletonSafe.org/letter