



## BRIEFLY

Four times since 1994 legislation authorizing charter schools cleared the legislature's House only to founder in the Senate Education Committee. This year, lawmakers favoring public charter schools as alternatives to conventional public schools are trying again.

They hope at least somewhat to mollify opponents by limiting this year's bill, HB 2415, to 20 pilot charter schools.

Nationally, the charter-school movement has picked up steam during the past 10 years. As of this year, 37 states have adopted legislation enabling communities with parent and teacher support to form charter schools.

Local supporters of charter schools feel it's time for Washington to join the majority.

# House Action on Charter Schools Expected

Washington remains among the minority of states that have yet to adopt legislation authorizing charter schools. As of this year, 37 states allow public charter schools as alternatives to conventional public schools.

It's not that support for charter schools is wanting in our legislature. Once again, Democratic Rep. Dave Quall is sponsoring charter-school legislation. Four times since 1994 similar legislation emerged from the House Education Committee. And each time, according to Quall, it received support from House leaders of both parties.

This year's bill, HB 2415, is much the same as the one two years ago, which was supported by Gov. Gary Locke, said Republican Rep. Gigi Talcott, who's also sponsoring the bill. Talcott and Quall co-chair the Education Committee. Both are former teachers.

The bill passed out of the Education Committee on Feb. 1, and is expected to clear the House. Once it reaches the Senate, however, it may fail to pass through the Senate Education Committee. Committee chair Rosemary McAuliffe, a Democrat, said a majority of her committee opposes a hearing on it.

That's surprising. Charter schools in Washington could stimulate educational improvements by offering parents and teachers a way to give students the curricula and conditions they need to learn well. Charter schools "can and do improve student learning," Quall testified during a January hearing on HB 2415 before the very committee he co-chairs.

Quall now wants state authorization for only 20 charter schools. He would leave it to future legislatures to decide how effective charter schools have been, and whether the state should add more or do away with them.

The charter-school movement has picked up steam during the past 10 years. "In response to widespread demands for better public education and for more choice among public schools, a number of state legislatures in the early 1990s permitted educators and local communities to develop charter schools," according to a 1997 charter-school report sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education.

"While these schools receive public funds, they operate unfettered by most state and local (school) district regulations governing other public schools," the report said. "Instead, they are held accountable for improving student performance and achieving the goals of their charter contracts.

"Some believe that if charter schools demonstrate educational success, they could provide effective educational models as well as create pressure on local and state public education systems to operate differently, thereby acting as a catalyst for changing public education across the nation."



HB 2415 would enable school districts, local universities and The Evergreen State College to sponsor charter schools. Existing public schools or altogether new schools, organized as public benefit nonprofit corporations, could serve as charter schools, each managed by its own board of directors, independently of school districts.

Charters would last five years. A sponsor could refuse to renew a charter, according to a staff bill analysis, “if the charter school has materially violated the terms of the charter, the students fail to meet student performance standards, the charter public school failed to meet generally accepted standards of fiscal management, or the charter school violated provisions of law than have not been waived.”

The central issue of charter schools is control. Parents and teachers school administrators want control of teaching methods, curricula and staffing. School boards and teacher unions may not want to give it up.

During the House Education Committee hearing on HB 2415, a retired California public-school principal testified enthusiastically about the charter-school law California adopted in 1992, noting that “every wonderful idea” she had when first she became a principal was dashed by some bureaucratic regulation or restriction. Charter schools, she said, are free to contract for services and use the savings to support school programs. They can make curricula more vigorous and introduce programs that make sense for the kids.

“Every decision is made in the best interest of the children, not in someone else’s,” she said.

Supporting testimony for charter schools also came from the Association of Washington Business and from the University of Washington’s Center for Reinventing Public Education. The center’s associate director, Robin Lake, said charter schools offer direct accountability between parents, teachers and boards. Together, these groups can make faster educational improvements by working together, focusing on learning and eliminating staff that do not contribute to it. Charter schools, she said, can quickly respond to problems, which traditional public schools often cannot. They can focus on student performance rather than on regulatory compliance.

Testifying against the bill were representatives of The League of Women Voters, the Washington State School Directors’ Association and the Washington Education Association. The League believes that charter schools should not operate independently of elected school boards. If there are unnecessary rules and regulations, then school boards are the ones that should do away with them.

A representative of the School Directors’ Association said that opposition from board directors arises from their view of what accountability means. They believe they are accountable for everything occurring within their districts. And they would be held accountable for charter schools but have no control over them.

The Washington Education Association – the teachers’ union – opposes provisions of the bill that would allow noncertificated people to teach and would force teachers to bargain at the charter-school rather than district level. The union also wants assurance that charter-school teachers would participate in the state retirement system.

Provided local unions are protected, however, the National Education Association supports charter schools in concept: “When well designed and operated, charter schools can become change agents within the public school system by charting new and creative ways of teaching and learning.”

Some opponents of charter schools believe they are exclusionary and elitist. But the 1997 charter-school report sponsored by the Education Department, in reviewing 90 percent of all charter schools operating during 1995-96, observed that while most charter schools were small, they served “the great racial and economic diversity of students that make up public education.”

“A sizable proportion of charter schools are designed to serve special populations, though most reflect the demographic characteristics of students in their geographic area,” said the report, officially called “A Study of Charter Schools: First Year Report – May 1997.”

“The variety in charter schools is evident,” the report added, “both in their diverse education programs and missions, in their array of approaches to management, governance, finance, parent involvement, and personnel policies.”

