



BRIEFLY

Initiative 729 asks voters to decide whether Washington shall allow for charter public schools. These schools give parents, teachers and administrators much for flexibility with teaching methods, curricula and staffing. Conventional public schools are subject to far more control by school districts and school boards.

Most states now agree that parents should have more choice in choosing schools for their children. So far, 37 states have adopted laws authorizing charter schools.

Initiative 729 preserves the state's commitment to education reform and accountability, while expanding the choices available to parents and students in the public school system.

Initiative 729: A Cautious First Step Toward Charter Schools

In the coming November elections, Washington voters will decide whether the state should authorize a new kind of public school, commonly known as “charter” schools.

Initiative 729 asks voters to decide this question: “Shall school districts and public universities be authorized to sponsor charter public schools, independently operated, open to all students, and subject to revised state regulation?”

To date, 37 states have enacted laws creating charter schools.

What’s a charter school? With charter public schools, parents, teachers and administrators may form schools that operate and educate students in accord with their ideas about education and with less interference from school districts and school boards. In charter schools, they would control teaching methods, curricula and staffing.

Under I-729, existing public schools may convert to charter schools. Otherwise, charter-school organizers must form a nonprofit corporation (not sectarian or religious) that applies for sponsorship by the school district within which they reside or by a state or regional university — to either of which their school would have to account for its academic and financial performance. Charter schools would have to provide detailed reports to their sponsors at least once a year.

Charter schools, moreover, would have to abide by state laws and rules on health, safety and civil rights. They would have to administer standardized tests required by state law, including the Washington Assessment of Student Learning test, and to employ certified teachers. They would have to meet financial and audit requirements. And they would have to adhere to the state’s Open Public Meeting Act.

They could not discriminate. I-729 bars charter schools from discriminating in admissions and operations based on race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, gender, income level, disabling condition, English proficiency and athletic ability. Nor could they charge tuition.

Funding. I-729 sets limits on the number of charter schools. No more than 20 charters may start during any four-year period, and no more than 80 may operate altogether. Conversions of existing public schools to charters do not count against the maximum, however. School districts with fewer than 1,000 students must wait until 2003 to sponsor a charter.

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As for how charter schools are financed, organizers are responsible the cost of creating a school (unless it's an existing public school). But charters would receive the same dollar amount per student that their local school districts allocate for each student. They would also receive categorical and non-basic education funds.

Charter schools sponsored by a school district would receive local levy dollars from levies passed after the effective date of their charters. Also, they could receive state matching funds for common-school construction. Charter schools sponsored by a university could not receive levy dollars.

Sponsors may retain up to 3 percent of state funding and local excess-levy funding to pay for oversight and administration.

Fiscal Impact. The cost to the state of charter schools is estimated to run between \$8 million and \$16 million. This estimate is based on the assumptions by state fiscal analysts that students would shift to charter schools from private and home schools at the rate of 18 percent in the first year and 15 percent in the second, and that 24 charters would exist in the 2001-school year, with total enrollment of 4,200 students, and 28 charters in the 2002-03 school year, with total enrollment of 6,240.

It is further estimated that school districts would transfer levy revenues to charter school totaling less than \$4 million during the 2001-03 biennium.

Comments. Proponents of charter schools, in and out of the Legislature, have worked hard for their cause during the past several years. A previous charter school initiative lacked the accountability provisions that are now included in I-729. In fact, the language of I-729 effectively is the same as that in HB 2415, which this year was blocked from legislative passage despite strong bipartisan support.

Charter schools are no longer very controversial. The approach taken in the initiative allows for a controlled, incremental introduction of charters schools into the state.

In sum, Initiative 729 preserves the state's commitment to education reform and accountability, while expanding the choices available to parents and students in the public school system.



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