



The Parent Point

A MONTHLY BRIEF FOR WASHINGTON'S PRIVATE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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Choice in all its forms: Why we can support charter schools

Since 1991 when Minnesota became the first state to pass enabling legislation, the charter school movement has grown rapidly. The U. S. Department of Education now lists thirty-nine states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico with charter laws and counts 2,700 schools in operation serving over 684,000 students. Nearly a third of all charter schools are located in Arizona and California. The federal government assists charter school development to the tune of over \$300 million annually. Despite these developments, Washington State lags behind the trend. Why would that be the case, and why would private school communities even care?

By definition of the Dept., charter schools are nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The "charter" establishing each such school is a performance contract detailing the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success. The length of time for which charters are granted varies, but most are granted for 3-5 years. At the end of the term, the entity granting the charter may renew the school's contract. Charter schools are accountable to their sponsor— usually a state, public college or university, or local school board— to produce positive academic results and adhere to the charter contract. The basic concept of charter schools is that they exercise increased autonomy in return for this accountability. They are accountable for both academic results and fiscal practices to several groups: the sponsor that grants them, the parents who choose them, and the public that funds them.

Several times in the last few years, the Washington Legislature has considered

charter school proposals. This session, a bill being considered would allow for up to 80 charters over a four year period to non-profit, non-religious organizations, granted by a local school district or state or regional university to operate some combination of K-12 program at state expense but exempt from much of the perceived current bureaucratic regulation. Senate Bill 5012, modeled after strong, successful programs in other states, would allow a school to operate with its own separate board of directors in an attempt to meet a particular philosophy and educational mission. At the same time, the operators would be required to comply with health, safety and civil rights laws; participate in nationally normed standardized tests and the WASL's; employ certificated staff; comply with employee records check requirements; be subject to financial audit and review and provide annual reports. Washington charter schools would be obligated to enroll all those who apply as space allows with preference to those students residing in the district in which the school is located. They could not charge tuition nor operate under sectarian influence and could not limit enrollment based on race, religion, gender, etc.

The argument against establishing charter schools in Washington centers on the authority (currently in statute) that allows individual districts to design and operate special focus schools through petition for waiver from many of the current regulatory restrictions. Supporters counter that the ability to do so still remains entangled within the ju-

risdiction of the local school board and, while a few of these programs are alive and thriving, the option to create these avenues is not commonly used.

WFIS has consistently supported the principle of providing a wide array of educational options for parents. Our Board Statement on Educational Liberty underscores our belief that the best campaign to improve Washington's schools would include a commitment to provide all parents a diversity of educational choices. These choices exist when parents have strong, quality options. A rich plurality is best achieved when each system is valued for its strengths and supported in its contribution to the whole. This proposal for public charter schools opens another door for families within the government-sponsored school system to choose new avenues for the education of their children. When parents have choices, all programs must respond. Choice demands existing schools to continue a cycle of strengthening in order to flourish. And that raises the bar for all of Washington's children.

In evaluating this bill, the Board of Directors believes it contains many of the elements of good charter legislation. It is an empowering act that will continue to encourage innovation and creativity in Washington's K-12 common school arena. It should be seen as a welcomed challenge to established public and private school programs to redefine their strategic goals and recommit to their missions. Private and public schools should not view charter schools in Washington as a threat, but rather embrace them as another partner in meeting the needs of students and families.

SB 5012 is a noble first step. Even though it does not go far enough in including options for religious institutions that may desire to apply for charter status, in keeping with our grounding statement calling for full educational choice for families, WFIS believes the underlying concept of charter schools is in the best interest of Washington's K-12 parents.

Visit our web site at www.wfis.org for more information on Washington's private schools.

For charter school information, click on www.uscharterschools.org