

Public Charter Schools

Background:

Public charter schools are public elementary and secondary schools operating in tandem with existing conventional public schools. 4,600 charter schools already operate in 40 states and were first implemented in Minnesota in 1991. In addition to state funding, charter schools are eligible for federal start-up funds as well as all traditional federal allocations granted to public schools to meet student needs.

Charter schools operate under “charters” with local school districts or public universities that identify student achievement goals, performance expectations and accountability measures for both student and school performance. Charter schools are exempt from many state rules governing items such as length of school day or school year, district curriculum selections, and teacher selection and assignment. However, charter school students are expected to meet the same state learning standards as conventional public schools, including attainment of statewide learning objectives and passage of statewide achievement tests.

The Legislature passed charter school legislation in 2004, but before the legislation could take effect, a successful referendum campaign overturned the law.

The election of President Obama in 2008 has, however, substantially increased support for charter schools nationwide. President Obama promises to double current charter school funding (\$216 million) over four years, proposing a \$52 million increase for FY 2010 alone. More importantly, the \$4.3 BILLION "Race to the Top" ("RTTT") federal grants will likely be available only to states that authorize charter schools.

Problem:

One of the criteria for receiving a federal grant under the RTTT program is whether a state puts any limits on the number of charter schools that can be created. Because Washington is one of only 10 states that does not currently allow any charter schools, the state is unlikely to receive any RTTT funding. This is unfortunate, because Washington might otherwise receive over \$200 MILLION under this federal grant program. In addition, by authorizing charter schools Washington’s existing alternative public schools and traditional public schools would have the option of accessing other federal grants as part of a school-district approved conversion to a charter school. In 2009, the US Department of Education awarded a total \$82 million in charter school grants to five states: AZ, LA, NM, TN & WI.

Solution:

1. Authorize the creation of public charter schools by local school districts, state universities and other accountable public entities (state board of education, etc.), including conversion of existing public schools into public charter schools.
2. Grant public charter schools a high degree of financial and organizational autonomy so that they have the freedom to customize staff, curriculum and educational services to best meet their students needs.
3. Hold each public charter school strictly accountable for improving student performance, including compliance with the Education Reform Act of 1993, as amended.
4. Create a level playing field in terms of both funding and regulation on which public charter schools and conventional public schools can compete for the privilege of serving students and their families.