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Why Virginia Needs A Charter School Amendment

By Chris Braunlich

Senator Mark Obenshain and Delegate Rob Bell have proposed a Virginia constitutional amendment permitting the State Board of Education to authorize public charter schools. If passed this year by the General Assembly, it goes to the voters for approval in November.

Because charter schools are relatively unknown in Virginia, it's important to understand how they operate in other states, what the results have been, and why they have failed to take hold here in the Commonwealth.

Charter schools are tuition-free public schools, designed to create an environment where parents are more involved, teachers are given freedom to innovate, and students are provided the structure best suited for their learning. Unlike "magnet schools," they have "open enrollment" policies without special entrance requirements. By giving teachers the ability to innovate and try new ways to improve student achievement, public charter schools are tailored to the needs of individual students.

The nature of their authorization is what makes them effective and different from traditional public schools. Instead of the state or the school district micro-managing school operations, school operators promise to meet student performance targets over the next five years. Authorizers give them the freedom and flexibility to do so. If schools fail, they are usually shut down.

How effective is this?

More than a quarter of the "Best High Schools in America," according to *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*, are public charter schools – even though only six percent of public high schools are charters. A higher percentage of charter students graduate high school and are accepted into a college or university than students in traditional public schools.

Public charter schools particularly excel in helping low-income students. A 2015 study by the [Center for Research on Education Outcomes \(CREDO\)](#) examined charters in 41 urban areas in 22 states, and found that charters collectively provide "significantly higher levels of annual growth in both math and reading compared to their Traditional Public School peers" -- the equivalent of 40 days of additional learning per year in math and 28 additional days in reading.

But does Virginia need charter schools? After all, on National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) exams, only a handful of states score higher than Virginia. The Commonwealth boasts the third highest percentage of high school seniors qualifying for college credit on Advanced Placement (AP) exams, and Virginia's SAT and ACT scores continue to rise.

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Those achievements, however, mask significant gaps: While a majority of middle income students score “Proficient” on Reading and Math NAEP exams, fewer than a quarter of low-income students do so. Those gaps – economic and racial – are echoed in Virginia’s own Standards of Learning exams, and can be seen in any number of school divisions where student performance has been in the tank for nearly two decades.

So why have public charter schools failed to become part of the solution in Virginia? A major reason is Virginia law. The lack of the autonomy allowed in other states means charters here are unable to innovate or adapt quickly to changing conditions. Unlike other states, here in Virginia charter schools are prevented from managing their own personnel or even budget decisions. Yet these are the things making charter schools successful.

Not only does Virginia not give up the proscriptive regulations it imposes on schools, but local school boards – currently the only entity allowed to authorize charters – don’t empower charter schools with autonomy. Virginia School Boards Association Executive Director Frank Barham admitted as much in 2002 when he wrote that the VSBA “got out front on the issue” of charter schools so that they could help “write it so that we could live with it.”

The results are examples like the Fairfax Leadership Academy, where an award-winning group of teachers endorsed by the local business community and teacher organization has been denied the opportunity to open a charter school focusing on under-performing students, adding 23 days to the school year, and providing “wrap-around” services for students and families.

Or consider Roanoke’s Blue Ridge Technical Academy, shut down by the local school board ten years ago, despite the fact that – even with a higher percentage of low-income students than the city school system – it exceeded the school division’s test scores in math, history, and English.

Watching these and other schools, quality charter school operators simply ask: “Why bother?”

This is what the Obenshain-Bell Charter School Constitutional Amendment seeks to change. By empowering the state to authorize charter schools, the General Assembly can return next year to write new laws granting state-authorized charters the flexibility, accountability, and managerial powers that have helped millions of low-achieving children in other states – without interfering with the rights of local school boards.

Struggling children deserve an opportunity to succeed. The Obenshain-Bell constitutional amendment simply provides another pathway to success. Why shouldn’t Virginia take it?