

April 11, 2013

House Committee on Education:

I have looked at HB 3208. I laud the intention, but I would like to make some suggestions. As currently drafted HB 3208 will not solve any of the very real problems that are actually preventing charter schools from serving more students in impoverished communities.

I know about these problems first hand because I have been the Executive Director of the Arthur Academies, six charter schools in and around Portland, for the past two and a half years, until I resigned in February. The model we use in our schools (Direct Instruction) has a great track record in working with students of poverty and minority students. In fact, nationally it is one of the most well researched models for serving students of poverty. We would have liked to open more schools, but our proposals were turned by districts unwillingness to sponsor charter schools. School districts perceive that charter schools "cost" them money, rather than save them money--and they can't be convinced otherwise. I have seen districts turn down similar proposals as well. I personally would be willing to propose developing charter schools that would be effective in such communities, but the problem would be finding a district willing to support such a proposal.

So while your bill as currently drafted says that the plan is to look for incentives for districts to sponsor charter schools, all the incentives mentioned would benefit the charter school (give it more money) but would not incentivize the districts who think they will lose money by having a charter school. Short of paying the school district, there is no way to incentivize them to support more charter schools. Rather than trying to find incentives for the districts to sponsor such schools the State Department of Education should directly sponsor schools to be located in high poverty neighborhoods--and if the state passed along 100% of the state funds that would be a great incentive to get more proposals. Which brings us to the second problem--locating the schools where they are needed--in the right neighborhoods.

Before I was part of the Arthur Academies, they opened a charter school in the Reynolds School District, which has fairly high poverty rates in parts of its district. They intended to serve that high needs population but could not find or afford to put a school in the part of the district with the greatest concentrations of poverty. Charter schools have no way to obtain a property until after their application is approved, so they have to take what is available (and cheap and easy to modify) after they are approved. So the Arthur Academy charter school ended up being placed in the new part of town and the rates of poverty in the Reynolds Arthur Academy charter school are even lower than the district average. So getting a location in a high poverty community is an issue. If the state were to purchase old schools (which are hard to lease from districts) or help purchase other properties and provide loans to remodel or build in high poverty areas, then the charter school that gets sponsored by the state could in fact serve that community.

Finally, the most difficult problem is that charter schools are schools of choice. It is up to parents to enroll in the school in advance of the lottery. The districts do not tell parents about these options and generally when parents arrive to enroll their children in the local school it is too late to get into the charter school. So the most savvy and best organized parents get in their

applications early and are chosen in the first lottery. And then their siblings have preference so soon there are few openings for the children of anyone else. In the Arthur Academy it is common to have over 20 of the slots for each kindergarten class filled by siblings, leaving little room for new families, and waiting lists of over a hundred names for the handful of openings.

That problem can only be fixed by either expanding or starting more charter schools in those neighborhoods, which the districts are unwilling to do. In fact, most charter contracts specify a limit to the number of students who can be served and districts routinely refuse to allow any increase--no matter how good a job is being done. Again, because school districts feel that charter schools cost them money they can ill afford. But if the state would allow expansion or sponsor additional charters in the neighborhood, then the need could be met.

So if the State would address the issues by being willing to sponsor charter schools, help find and pay for suitable locations, and enable or allow growth then schools that would serve impoverished communities would flourish. What is in the draft now, by attempting to find incentives for school districts, will be unlikely to result in any new charter schools, let alone ones that serve high poverty communities.

I would be glad to help draft legislation that would have the desired impact.

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