

Push to Alter School Law in Georgia

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ATLANTA- Several Georgia lawmakers are pushing to overhaul the state's law creating charter schools, the publicly funded academies that operate independently of the standard educational system.

The move to revamp the law comes at a time when parents are fuming over charter schools they claim were set up illegally. Moreover, many parents and politicians say that most of the newly created schools across the state are merely souped-up public schools instead of fresh educational fixes.

Charter schools get to scrap standard curriculum guidelines and are allowed to use different teaching methods and other innovations to motivate students. Although some charter schools may focus on gifted students, others also target at-risk groups. Georgia was the first state in the Southeast, and the third in the country, to experiment with the concept when its charter-school law took effect in 1993.

Catching on

Since then, other states have embraced the charter-school approach. For example, in the 24 other states (plus the District of Columbia) where charter schools have been authorized since Georgia's law was enacted, such groups as parents, foundations and corporations are leading the organizing efforts and opening schools in unusual places like factories and office parks. In some states, thousands have enrolled.

Georgia's neighbors are also taking steps to set up charter schools. North Carolina is moving the fastest, with applications for 69 charter schools that it plans to approve or deny by March 5. South Carolina has received one application since approving its law last year, and Alabama legislators are working on proposals for their next session in February.

But in Georgia, where the law only allows charter schools to be set up by converting existing schools, there has been no rush to establish them. In the few years since the law was enacted, only 12 existing schools have been converted to charter schools. Critics say the state law was poorly drafted and places too many barriers to new educational approaches, not to mention the way it limits the number of charter schools that are started.

“What’s the incentive to convert to a charter school if there are still hoops to jump through?” asks Barbara Christmas, head of the Professional Association of Georgia Educators, the state’s largest trade group of teachers and administrators.

So now, lawmakers led by Sen. Clay Land of Columbus and Rep. Kathy B. Ashe of Atlanta, both Republicans, are trying to open the gates in Georgia. “I think that when you confine charters to current schools, you limit the innovations you could get,” Ms. Ashe says.

Parental Involvement

The legislators’ goal is to rewrite the law so that parents and community organizations can start charter schools and operate them using the public money designated for each student’s schooling. Mr. Land’s bill also would require the majority of a charter school’s governing board to be parents of a school’s students, rather than educators.

The lawmakers have some powerful friends supporting a change in the law. The list includes Democrat Lt. Gov. Pierre Howard, the Christian Coalition and the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank, as well as several Democratic legislators, including David Scott, who represents one of the poorest Atlanta districts.

And while the state teachers’ union opposes any revamp of the law, even John W. Rhodes, who runs the state’s charter-school program backs change. “I would like to see a more expansive law to see what happens,” he says. “We are administering a program within the law given to us by the General Assembly.”

Charter schools nationwide are the reaction to an outcry against poor public school quality, a complaint heard commonly in Georgia. The state’s Scholastic Assessment Test scores have ranked near the bottom of the national list for several years, beating only South Carolina’s.

Proficiency Problem

And while a yearlong study released by Education Week magazine this month rated the state's public school system as above average overall, mainly for its "promising policies," the report also noted that only 26% of Georgia's fourth graders read proficiently, and only 13% of eighth-graders are proficient in math.

Ms. Ashe, who sits on the House Education Committee, says she gets two to three calls a day from parents with complaints about the state's current charter-school law. That frustration is coming from both wealthy and poor communities.

For example, Louise Watley, who has spent much of her life trying to help residents of Atlanta's Carver Homes low-income housing project, hopes for a law that would let parents there start a cluster of four schools that children could attend from kindergarten through 12th grade. "I envision a sort of Westminster South, with a headmaster over all the schools," Ms. Watley says, referring to one of Atlanta's most prestigious private schools.

She gathered more than 100 parents and their children last fall for a breakfast at the housing project's community center. They talked about ideas for a campus that could target the needs of children whose parents work, and also could be used in the evenings for high-school equivalency classes and other adult courses.

Most of all, she views organizing a charter school as a way to quash what she considers teachers' discrimination against children who grow up in the 990-unit housing project. "We do all this stuff in the community, and we help them with their homework," she says, "and they get to school . . . and no one will recognize them when they raise their hands."

Under the current law, there's no way for Carver Homes to test its idea. "The way it stands now, the only thing we could get would be a glorified public school, and it doesn't make sense to go through all the changes for that," Ms. Watley says.

Frustrated Parents

Meanwhile, a group of parents in suburban Bartow County has become so frustrated with one elementary school's unwillingness to include them in its changeover to a charter school that it turned to Attorney General Michael J. Bowers in December for an opinion, hoping he would interpret the state's charter law to mean such efforts legally

required more parental involvement. “The parents were sold a bill of goods when they should have controlled the process,” says James P. Kelly III, a lawyer and president of the Georgia Association of Charter School Parents.

While Mr. Bowers hasn’t yet responded, he is expected to rule that despite a requirement in current law that calls for “substantial” involvement by parents, charter-school boards aren’t required to have a parental majority.

Regardless of the ruling, the Bartow parents are angry that Cloverleaf Elementary didn’t inform them for several months about plans to convert to a charter school focusing on the fine arts. Then in November, the parents received three days’ notice of a meeting where they were asked to vote on the application. Several parents say they were denied copies of it.

“I’m not opposed to charter schools, but I don’t know enough about them, and nobody could answer my questions,” says Darryl Farr, whose child attends Cloverleaf. He also notes that about 90 parents attended the meeting, a small percentage for a school with more than 600 students.

Cloverleaf Principal Bobby McMillan says his school followed the state’s rules appropriately, with 87% of the parents who attended the meeting voting to approve the application.

Georgia’s charter schools include four each in Cartersville and Cobb County. The Forsyth County system has converted an Alpharetta elementary school, and Chatham County has used the law to boost its Montessori program at an elementary school in Savannah, Mr. Rhodes says. The Bartow County and Griffin-Spaulding school districts each converted one school earlier this month.

Union Opposition

Despite the widespread calls for a stronger law, the effort could face substantial hurdles. For starters, the teachers’ union, the Georgia Association of Educators, is dead set against a rewrite of the law, contending its merely a cloaked attempt at getting tax dollars flowing to private schools. “Our association believes the bottom line [of the charter-school reform idea] is public money for private schools, and we’re opposed to it,” says lobbyist Kay H. Pippin.

And from a strategic standpoint, shifting the law may be harder than the initial tough battle in 1993. “One of the hardest things I’ve seen,” says Alex Medler, who tracks charter schools for the Education Commission of the States, a Denver think tank, “is the attempt to amend a weak law and make it really powerful.”

Indeed, Ted Kolderie, an early proponent in Minnesota, which passed the country’s first charter law in 1991, says that so far no state has succeeded in beefing up its original law.