

Independent Charter Schools: Siphoning off Public Money to Private Interests

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In this week's column, Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about new legislation that will allow statewide expansion of private charter schools at the expense of public schools.

ALMA - "Will the Legislature allow statewide expansion of charter schools and how will that affect my local public school?"

This question is one I hear so often particularly in communities where people are worried about the future of their small local schools.

Last fall, the Senate Education Committee debated Senate Bill 76, which takes away local control by requiring locally elected school boards to replicate charter schools when the charter performs 10% better than local district for 2 years in a row. It also allows certain charter schools to opt out of the state's teacher evaluation system.

Private charter school companies lobbied hard for complete independence from state oversight but SB 76 did not go that far. School officials and citizens expressed serious concern about how expanding charter schools would impact public schools.

Money to run independent charter schools comes from school aid set aside for all public schools. The more money going to independent charter schools means less money for all public schools. For small cash-strapped districts, the expansion of independent charter could be

devastating.

Sixty percent of Wisconsin's public school districts are rural. As the amount of state school aid shrinks, small schools are particularly hard hit. Many rural districts are forced to pass referendum just to survive. Local property tax payers pick up more and more of the cost of their local schools.

Siphoning off even more state dollars for private independent charter schools will mean less educational opportunities for our children attending our local schools.

The public outcry against statewide expansion of charter schools made a difference.

Last month when the Senate Education committee took final action on SB 76 it was a scaled back version of the original bill. The amendment passed by the committee made the bill provisions apply only to the Milwaukee area.

But the committee did nothing to address the funding problem so public schools will still take a financial hit as independent charter schools expand.

Just as local schools celebrated this small victory, another charter school expansion bill reared its head in the State Assembly.

The bill was introduced in December by a group of suburban Milwaukee Assembly Republicans who are focused on passing a statewide charter school expansion bill before the Legislative Session ends. The bill contains many provisions of the Next Generation Charter Schools Act created and promoted by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). The bill is already scheduled for a quick public hearing.

Assembly Bill 549 expands who can authorize an independent charter school and stops local school districts from operating a charter school. Instead school boards must convert any charter

school to a magnet school. This bill brings the law closer to the lobbying goals of the private charter management companies: eliminate any local control over charter schools.

Couple this with a requirement that any student from any district could go to any independent charter school and you end up with a world much closer to the goals of the private charter management companies: a privately operated school system that can siphon both money and students from any local public school.

When local schools are not well-funded and the best students are siphoned off, their future is in peril.

The next step in this privatization scheme is closing public schools. This happens because private charter schools drain not only taxpayer dollars but also the best students from local schools – leaving high cost disabled, impoverished and non-English speaking students in poorly funded public schools. With fewer resources and students, many public schools in other states have been forced to close.

Expanding independent privately run charter schools is unnecessary and unwise. Not considering how to pay for the statewide expansion of privately run charter schools is like talking about the color of a new car but not how to pay the car payments. In the end children in our communities are robbed of their greatest educational opportunities.

In the words of Garrison Keillor, “When you wage war on the public schools, you’re attacking the mortar that holds the community together. You’re not a conservative, you’re a vandal.”

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