

Does Wisconsin Want Out-of-State Companies Running Schools with Public Dollars?

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The Senate Education Committee is having hearings on a bill that would allow for expansion of charter schools statewide without taking into consideration the fiscal impact on public schools. The proposed law, Senate Bill 76, significantly impacts local control and allows out-of-state companies to establish charter schools using taxpayer dollars. And dollar for dollar those funds will be taken from public schools.

MADISON - Do we want to encourage out-of-state companies to run local schools with tax dollars? This is the objective of a bill before the Senate Education Committee.

Katy Venskus of San Jose based *Rocketship Education* recently explained the objective of a bill to expand charter schools was “attracting high quality national operators.”

Folks often think of charter schools as a kind of magnet school – a specialized school the local school board creates to serve students with a special interest. For example a Montessori School uses a certain approach to teach young children. The school is created by the school board and operates under a contract or *charter*.

Charter school advocates who attended a recent Education Committee hearing explained school boards should be required to expand charter schools when the charter performs 10% better. (Better than *what* was unclear.)

Should Wisconsin allow charter schools authorized by a school board to multiply without the active decision of a local school board? Should universities, tech colleges, CESAs and other entities create public charter schools run by private companies?

Private companies already run some public schools in Milwaukee. Proponents want to expand this statewide. "Wisconsin's process for out-of-state operators is very difficult to navigate," testified Ms. Venskus from *Rocketship Education*.

At the heart of the charter school discussion was the way these schools are funded. Money to run independent or "2r" charter schools comes from school aid set aside for all public schools. The more money that goes into independent charter schools, the less money is allocated for all public schools.

DPI testified the taxpayer cost of independent privately run schools during this school year is \$64 million. The state pays almost \$8,000 a student for over 8,000 students in Milwaukee and Racine to attend independent charter schools. This cost is born by nearly every other public school district in the state.

A DPI spokesperson also testified Wisconsin residents will likely see an increase – perhaps significant – in property taxes "if non-elected charter school authorizers are expanded statewide".

Senator Lehman expressed concerns the school board would not be able to authorize a charter school and say to the school, "we don't want you to duplicate."

This 'automatic' duplication without school board consent, even when the charter was an instrument of the school board, led to much conversation about a loss of local control.

Committee members expressed concern about the 'automatic' expansion of charter schools, even those originally authorized by a locally elected school board.

Several times during the hearing the conversation turned to the underfunding of public schools in the last several state budgets. When I brought up concerns for sorely underfunded rural schools that would lose even more money under this proposal, I was told by the Committee Chairman the hearing was about charter schools and not about the state budget.

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.

Senator Darling, author of the bill, suggested the solution to funding was “to increase the pie” of school funding. But there was no proposal before the committee to change the funding of schools. There was not even an estimate on the cost of this bill.

After the Senate hearing I spent time asking folks about their reaction to the plan to open the public checkbook wider for private firms to run public schools.

People reminded me there is no evidence private charter schools have any better academic outcomes than public schools when compared on a level playing field. “The real enemy of students' academic success is poverty,” a superintendent said.

Another told me, “This bill is the key for private business to open the door and the fiscal death knell to the students who want to continue to attend public schools.”

Wisconsin is not ready to turn over the state checkbook to private companies to run our public schools. Instead let us recognize poor students cost more to educate. Our focus should be on a fair way to pay for public schools. Not on siphoning off our local dollars for an out-of-state company to run a Wisconsin school.

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