

Democratic lawmakers living in a vacuum need to suck it up

By Jim Waters

Democrats in the state Legislature apparently think that supporting [public charter schools](#) puts them in cahoots with the entire Republican agenda.

Earlier this month, during a rare Friday afternoon session to conclude the first week of the 2011 legislative session, all 15 Senate Democrats voted against [Senate Bill 3](#). Among its provisions: It would allow local districts to have charter schools.

While the bill is fairly anemic, the vote was historic. For the first time, a Kentucky legislative chamber approved charter-school legislation.

But Senate Democrats unanimously refused to embrace the historical significance and value of the idea, even though their man in the White House talks endlessly about the need for innovative reforms that charter schools offer. Perhaps Kentucky Democrats should consider new careers selling vacuums.

They seem to be living in one. Their fellow Democrats throughout the country have signed into law much of the nation's growing school-choice legislation:

- In Tennessee, former Gov. Phil Bredesen led the way toward significant education reforms, including lifting a cap on charter schools, thus allowing the state to get \$500 million from the "Race to the Top" education stimulus pot.
- New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo increased caps on charter schools, a move supported by the state's former Gov. David Paterson, also a Democrat.
- As mayor of Oakland, Calif., now Golden State Gov. Jerry Brown, supported charter schools.
- Under then Gov. Janet Napolitano, now Homeland Security secretary, Arizona started four new school-choice programs in 2006.
- Before becoming U.S. Agriculture Department secretary, then Gov. Tom Vilsack, D-Iowa, signed a school-choice law in his state.

Contrary to claims of bureaucrats, teacher-union fear mongers and others stuck in the status quo ditch, none of these efforts "destroyed public education." In fact, optimism for these publicly paid for and innovatively managed charter schools stretches beyond politics.

It focuses on what Kentucky educators claim they strive for: outcomes. Recent research speaks to the positive outcomes of charters:

- In 2009, RAND Corp. reported that charter-school students graduate from high school and attend college between 7 percent and 15 percent more often than their traditional public-school counterparts.
- The Cato Institute's Andrew Coulson noted in a Detroit News column that the average charter school in Michigan spent \$2,000 less in 2006-07 state and local taxes per pupil than the average school district and 20 percent overall less than their traditional counterparts. Imagine how such savings would impact Kentucky's budget, which needed federal stimulus money to close a \$787- million gap last year. Wouldn't filling that gap while giving parents more choices offer political rewards — even for Democrats?

- The Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University's Caroline Hoxby, Vanderbilt University and the Boston Foundation all reveal that once students attend charter schools for at least three years, they begin to outperform their traditional-school peers.

Democratic leaders understandably have concerns about retreating to the days of segregation. But charters have taken us down the road to more, not less, diversity. Nearly 60 percent of the 1.5 million students enrolled in charter schools nationwide are minority students and from low-income households.

With 25 percent of Kentucky's high school students dropping out and barely the same percentage of eighth-graders proficient in key academic areas, wouldn't it make sense for Democrats to rethink their positions? The communities they represent are affected disproportionately by public education failures. Shouldn't they fear living in the past with regard to the state's education system?

Democratic lawmakers in Kentucky should look to fellow Democrats in other states for leadership if they cannot find it at home and stand strong for their constituents, their communities and – most of all – for every Kentucky child.

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