

School choice effort could remake education in N.C.

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North Carolina's public schools may be in for a seismic shift, and not just from the unsettling impact of a year of budget cuts.

Republican lawmakers who control the legislature aim to remake the education landscape in North Carolina with a free-market model that offers families more options, while gradually lessening the dominance of traditional public schools. Their approach leans more to the private sector and beckons entrepreneurs to the state to start new schools.

The GOP lawmakers would like to see many more charter schools, which receive public money but have more flexibility in their operations and regulations. And they'd like to see more families send their children to private and parochial schools with the help of state tax credits. The state could save money if more students attend private schools, they argue, and competition would be healthy for everyone.

"If it isn't working, give us some choices," said House Majority Leader Paul Stam of Apex, who proposed the tax credit bills.

Others warn that the new proposals could suck money and students from traditional public schools, weakening them. The changes could ultimately lead to a two-tiered education system, they argue - one for students with means and the other for poor children.

Last week, in a debate over the Republican effort to lift the 100-school cap on charters, Democratic lawmakers sounded alarms in the strongest terms possible.

"If this bill passes and is implemented," said Rep. Rick Glazier, a Fayetteville Democrat, "we just signed the death warrant for public education."

John Dornan, senior fellow with the nonprofit Public School Forum of North Carolina, said there is an ideological battle under way that could have implications

Big changes in the works

Several bills and laws debated since January could mean sweeping change for North Carolina education. Among them:

Charter schools. The bill would eliminate the longstanding 100-school cap on the number of charter schools. The latest version sets an annual limit of 50 on new charters and sets up a commission that would govern charters that would work under the State Board of Education. It also requires schools to provide lunch for students at 185 percent of the poverty threshold and transportation if they live within three miles of the school.

The bill is expected to get final House approval Monday and would go next to the Senate.

Tax credits. Pending bills would offer tax credits to families that enroll their children in private schools.

The general tax credit would give parents \$2,500 a year. At that amount, it's likely that most of the migration would be to religious-affiliated schools or to private schools that charge relatively low tuition.

A special education tax credit would offer \$6,000 a year to parents of children with disabilities. The bill would also set up a special education fund that would get \$2,000 each semester for each student who uses the credit. That money would be used for special ed students who remain in public schools.

Elimination of some tests. This has been more of a bipartisan issue, but controversial nonetheless. Last month, the legislature passed a law eliminating four end-of-course tests for high school students in U.S. history, civics and economics, Algebra II and physical science. The law was opposed by the State Board of Education, which said getting rid of the tests would remove an important measure of accountability.

Budget cuts. It's unclear yet just how the state's budget crisis will affect the public schools, but one idea on the table is to merge or downsize the state's early childhood programs. Those programs, created under former Democratic governors, have shown positive results on student performance.

for the state's diverse population and economic future.

"We can talk all we want about, are charters good, better or different," said Dornan, who supports charter schools, "but the core of this thing is really an attempt to move us away from a primary focus on strong public schools, and move to some competition, free-market model."

The problem, he said, is that "absolutely no one can point to evidence that this is going to be better for the overwhelming majority of our kids."

North Carolina's tea party movement is incorporating public-school reform into its drive to limit the size and reach of government. Bruce Gardner, a Waynesville retiree, travels eight southern states as a leader of Tea for Education, a group that trains tea party leaders to advocate for more parental choice.

"Public education is something less than successful for many of our children," Gardner said. "I think it's unconscionable that North Carolina has been dragging its feet in passing legislation to allow competition. It will benefit public education as well as children to have competition."

Lottery for seats

To some families, having an alternative to a low-performing public school could be the difference between a child's success or failure.

A group called Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina, which pushes for school choice, has distributed a video to lawmakers showing a tense lottery drawing for slots in a popular charter school.

The video shows a crowded room of anxious parents, with ominous music and the words, "The quality of a child's education should not depend on luck," as a hand pulls names out of a box. Most students don't get picked.

Charters do have a role to play in communities where public schools aren't meeting the needs of every child, said Sheri Strickland, president of the N.C. Association of Educators, the state teachers group.

But, she said, "even with the elimination of a cap, the vast majority of our kids are going to still go to traditional public schools, and we have to make sure they're taken care of first."

Traditional public

Traditional public schools dominant

A huge majority of North Carolina's approximately 1.6 million school-age children attend traditional public schools. Here's a breakdown of the latest numbers:

Traditional public: 86.7 percent

Private: 5.8 percent

Home schools: 4.9 percent

Charter: 2.5 percent

Sources: N.C. Department of Public Instruction, N.C. Department of Administration

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During a lesson on antonyms and synonyms, Nancy Ramos, left, and Aundria Hilliard are pleased to be partnered with one another at Maureen Joy Charter School in Durham. State law sets a 100-school limit on charters.

Darrell Allison, president of Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina, rejects the notion that expansion of charters is somehow a form of privatization.

"Charter schools are public schools," he said, "and just another means by which we deliver public education."

The group's message is catching on, apparently - about 700 people attended a forum in Raleigh in January that featured some of the nation's leading advocates of charters and school vouchers. In 2009, the group received \$275,000 from the Walton Family Foundation, the Arkansas-based philanthropic arm of the Walmart founders.

Last week, the House voted to lift the charter cap and allow as many as 50 new charter schools to set up shop in North Carolina annually. That version of the bill now goes to the Senate, and there is some suggestion that Perdue might veto the bill if it is approved there.

Emotional House debate

The House debate was emotional. Rep. William Wainwright, a Havelock Democrat, last week denounced the charter bill, calling it "a return to Jim Crow."

The schools were supposed to be innovative incubators, he said, but they have become a way for affluent kids to opt out of public schools. And though the bill includes, for the first time, requirements that charters provide food and transportation to some nearby low-income students, too many poor and minority kids are left out.

Allison, who is African-American, disagrees. He said he wants middle-class and poor families to have access to private education. And he supports tax credits.

Choice for more?

Programs to allow broader education choices are sprouting rapidly in some states. Forty states now have charter schools. Florida and Texas each have about 400.

Florida has a program that gives tax credits to corporations that contribute money for scholarships to private schools. Last week, the U.S. Supreme Court dismissed a legal challenge to Arizona's tax-credit program, opening the door to more state support of religious schools.

Nationally, there are 20 different programs allowing tax credits or vouchers for parents who send children to private schools; some are focused on the general population, while others are restricted to low-income families, said Andrew Coulson, director of Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, which advocates for school choice.



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Cameron Hill of Raleigh, a student at Raleigh Charter High School, dissects a frog in ninth-grade biology class. Raleigh Charter is one of the top-performing schools in the state. A Republican-sponsored bill would allow 50 new charters per year.



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Elvis Galvez responds to teacher Kristen Parker's questions at Maureen Joy Charter School. The Durham school is for kindergartners through eighth-graders.

"What's about to happen in just the next five to 10 years is a competition for tax dollars and upwardly mobile families," Coulson said.

As states such as Florida move further down the road of choice, he said, more states will follow with educational options and lower taxes to companies and to families.

North Carolina is beginning to get the attention of some new types of charters. Charter school chains such as the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) and the for-profit National Heritage Academies have charters in the state, but the bill would open the state to online charters that offer classes for children as young as 5.

The for-profit online charter company K12 Inc. is interested in North Carolina. It operates in 27 states and the District of Columbia.

Most studies show that the quality of charter schools varies widely, said Jeffrey Grove, research associate with the Southern Regional Education Board, a coordinating organization for Southern states.

Adding another 50 schools per year, he said of North Carolina's proposal, "would certainly be an enormous change. In the end, what it comes down to is there has to be quality control at all the various steps in the process."

The quality must be ensured at the initial approval stage, he said, because it has been shown to be difficult to shut down low-performing charters. Most closures are due to financial issues, not academic quality, he said.

"Most of the research has shown that charter schools, on average, don't tend to do really much better or worse than traditional public schools," Grove said. "Now if you go down to a finer grain level, you can divide them out and you do find charter schools that are performing significantly better as well as ones that are performing significantly worse."

Under the bill approved tentatively by the House last week, a commission would review applications for new charters, and make recommendations to the State Board of Education.

Too much growth too fast would be difficult to monitor, said John Tate, a Charlotte businessman and eight-year state board member. The board has tried to demand more of the current charters, he said.

"I don't think there's anybody on the board that is opposed to charter schools," he said. "What we're opposed to is sorry schools."

There are excellent charter schools in North Carolina, Tate said, and those need to be used as models for more.

Tax credits a threat?

Tate said the bigger threat to public education is tax credits.

"A tax credit in my opinion is no different from a voucher," he said. "The very first thing we need to be doing is making our public schools better. We don't need to be incenting people to leave public schools."

Kent Misegades, a director of businessman and Republican donor Robert Luddy's Thales Academies, says low-income students could benefit from the proposed tuition tax credit, which could be used for after-school tutoring or other purposes as well as daily instruction.

"It's sort of like a pseudo voucher program," he said.

Dorman, of the Public School Forum, said North Carolina has drawn the attention of the tea party and other groups that are more supportive of private education than public education.

"We are now one of their target states," he said. "They're obviously seeing this as very fertile ground."

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