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Delegates gave up on students, teachers and innovative ideas

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In abandoning the Senate's education omnibus bill, West Virginia delegates gave up a precious opportunity to help the state's teachers and students. The bill, passed earlier in February by the Senate, would have allowed the establishment of charter schools and introduced Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) for some families. Delegates had the chance to review this legislation and decide whether to keep all or part of its provisions. But if they really wanted to help the state's students – and teachers – they would have kept school choice.

Charter schools and ESA programs would give the struggling students of West Virginia some hope. Their current performance is shocking: 72 percent of West Virginia high school seniors lack proficiency in reading, and 88 percent lack proficiency in math. And, according to U.S. News and World Report, the Mountain State ranks a dismal 45th in the nation for education.

That's why West Virginia should join the 44 states and countless municipalities that already welcome the proven benefits of charter schools.

New Orleans, for instance, began converting nearly all of its public schools to charter schools in 2005 – and student performance has shot up. The Education Research Alliance for New Orleans found that charter schools increased student test scores in math and reading by 11 to 16 percentiles, high school graduation rates by three to nine percentage points and college entry by eight to 15 percentage points. In 2015 and again in 2017, Los Angeles charter school students scored 10 points higher than their public school counterparts in 8th grade math and reading. A Stanford University study also found that L.A.'s charter school students gained the equivalent to 50 and 79 days' more learning in reading and math, respectively. If they'd only give charter schools a chance, West Virginia could enjoy the same kind of improvements.

Charter school students are also succeeding in New York, Detroit, Milwaukee and elsewhere. Don't West Virginian students deserve the same opportunity for academic excellence?

Lawmakers should also keep Education Savings Accounts (ESAs). ESAs direct a portion of state education funding to a special account that parents can access for education expenses like homeschooling, tutoring or community college tuition. And in a 2018 survey of American views on school choice, EdChoice found that 74 percent of Americans and 78 percent of public school teachers support ESAs.

It's not hard to see why ESAs are so popular.

Arizona Dad Marc Ashton used an ESA to help his blind son Max attend the best school in Arizona and go on to attend college. "Max is going to be able to go on to Loyola Marymount University, one of the greatest colleges in the country, and do extremely well," Ashton said, "because we were able to save money, even sending him to the best school in Arizona, all for what the state would normally pay for it."

Education policy analyst Jonathan Butcher surveyed ESA-using Arizona parents and found that every parent who responded echoed Ashton's views. In fact, 100 percent of respondents reported satisfaction with the ESA program and 71 percent reported being "highly satisfied." But students and parents are not the only ones benefiting from school choice programs – teachers do too.

West Virginia spends \$11,705 on average per student every year for education. There are typically 14 students per classroom, thus, an average class receives \$163,870 dollars per year. Yet the average teacher is paid only \$45,642 per year.

Where does all of that classroom funding go? Largely to non-teaching staff, such as administrators, counselors, custodians and others. A 2017 study found that between 1992 and 2014, public schools increased their teaching force by 28 percent and their non-teaching staff by 45 percent – more than double the increase in the student population. If public schools hired fewer non-teaching staff in keeping with changes in student population, the study found they could have given every teacher a \$11,100 raise.

By introducing competition, school choice programs encourage public schools to re-evaluate these lopsided hiring priorities. In short, public schools must offer competitive salaries or lose their teachers. According to Cato Institute education scholar Corey DeAngelis, every study that has examined the effects of school choice on teacher compensation confirms that more choice means higher salaries.

Delegates forgot that school choice programs empower parents and students while honoring the teachers who make this learning possible. West Virginian students and teachers alike need school choice.