

# GANNETT

It's all within reach.

## Charter schools about options, Casada says

*Rep backs charter school authorizer opposed by boards*

By: Maria Giordano – March 13, 2013

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Rep. Glen Casada, R-Franklin, supports a state authorizer panel and believes it would usher in more charter schools for the state and ultimately give students more options.

The proposed panel of nine members would be part of an appeals process for charter school applicants denied at the local level, and as Casada said Wednesday, serve as a “filter for districts that want to maintain the status quo.”

The charter authorizer bill, known as HB 702, passed Wednesday in the House Government Operations Committee on a voice vote. It now heads to the finance committee.

“I think when you have children — not every child is designed to go through a government-run school,” Casada said. “There should be an outlet, and this is how it would benefit a high-performing school district.”

But local school officials from Williamson County Schools and the Franklin Special School District don't see it that way. Both boards of education publicly opposed any kind of state authorizer, saying such a panel would remove local control.

FSSD Director David Snowden said his school board took a stand on the issue back in December, and still feels the same way, adding that authorizing charter schools should be in the hands of the local school board.

“I don't understand his (Casada's) rationale there,” Snowden said. “It's somewhat amazing to me that our legislators talk about local control, local control, local control — and here is something that takes away local control. To me it contradicts what they speak about on many occasions.”

Casada said the proposal puts the focus on education and children.

There have been no charter schools to take root in either local district. However, a letter of intent to apply for a charter school in Williamson County was submitted for the first time this year. Leaders of the proposed Robert Baker Owen Institute of Education must turn in its formal application by April 1.

Charter schools are privately run schools that use public funds. If the Owen Institute were to be approved, the county school system would essentially write a check to the leadership based on the district's per pupil expenditures.

The proposed first year of enrollment for the school that would have an agricultural and advanced academic track is 32 students. That would cost the district about \$250,000, a figure that would double each year of its 10 year span.

#### Williamson is not program's focus

Casada says the state authorizer is needed for educational reforms for the whole state, and went on to say he would be shocked if more than a few dozen Williamson County residents would attend a charter school because of the local districts' academic success.

The state authorizer is more about preventing districts such as Metro Nashville Public Schools from denying a charter school for no good reason, but to maintain failing schools, Casada said. He said there was no logical reason the Nashville school board blocked Arizona-based charter school Great Hearts Academy.

The Metro school board lost \$3.4 million in state funding as punishment for that action. Board members said they thought the charter school could not guarantee diversity in predominantly white West Nashville.

“If any local school board has empirical data that shows (a charter school) is not in the best interest of the child, I think you will find the (state authorizer) will support the local board’s decision,” Casada said. “It’s just one more filter so that the local authority is not focusing on themselves, but on the child.”

County schools’ director Mike Looney said he was disappointed in Casada’s stance, but said the district would continue to provide an exemplary education to all of its students, even though they may be forced to do that with fewer resources.

“I understand he has to vote his conscience,” Looney said of Casada. “Ultimately, the citizens of Williamson County will decide if his views on educational reform aligns with theirs.”

#### Pointing to studies

He added that the research is quite clear on charter schools. Looney referred to a 2009 Stanford University study of charter schools in 16 states that showed 87 percent of the schools either failed to perform at the same level as public schools or produce similar results. Seventeen percent performed better than traditional schools, he said.

Coincidentally, The Cato Institute — a nonpartisan public policy research organization — recently released an analysis that says charter schools will actually have a bigger impact on private school enrollment.

“While most students are drawn from traditional public schools, charter schools are pulling large numbers of students from the private education market and present a potentially devastating impact on the private education market, as well as a serious increase in the financial burden on taxpayers.”

In the meantime, Looney said, “Rep. Casada has the right to be wrong.”

