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## **U.S. House Passes Charter Bill That Could Reduce School Choice**

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A bipartisan bill that recently passed the U.S. House of Representatives would send more money to charter schools nationwide, but some charter advocates warn federal funding will inevitably decrease charter autonomy and, therefore, quality.

More than 2.2 million students attend charter schools across 42 states and DC, accounting for more than 6,000 schools. Enrollment has increased quickly, and more one million students now sit on charter school wait lists. Charter schools are public schools that receive curriculum, financial, and staffing flexibility in exchange for the threat of closure for poor performance.

The National Association for Public Charter Schools, an advocacy group, worked closely with House leaders on [The Success and Opportunity through Quality Charter Schools Act](#), or H.R.10.

The bill gives flexibility to schools using start-up grants, a big plus, said NAPCS spokeswoman Katherine Bathgate. The bill will send more money to charters that perform according to federal expectations and prioritizes funds for states that do not limit charter school growth.

“The federal charter school program only allows for three-year grants to charter schools, so they’re limited grants for start-up funding only,” Bathgate said. “It’s not a situation where the federal government could be subsidizing interest rates or ongoing operational costs of charter school... Basically it’s there to help charter school leaders to open their doors and start helping students.”

### **Increasing Bureaucracy, Limiting Choice**

Some school choice advocates, however, are skeptical about HR 10’s positive impact.

“It seems like the bill is just trying to streamline funding streams that are already there,” McShane said. “It’s not really creating anything new.”

Charters already put time into lengthy applications to open, and increasing bureaucratic regulations will reduce their ability to put energy into more productive pursuits, he noted. Even

so, charters typically bypass a lot of the bureaucracy traditional public schools deal with, allowing providers quick access to funding, McShane said.

“The government has no cost authority to do this and Republicans should recognize that,” said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute.

If they take federal money, charters will inevitably have to deal with growing federal interference in how they operate, he said. Bathgate said the potential for federal money outweighed concerns over accompanying federal regulation.

“Obviously were there to be a [flurry] of increased regulation that would be a concern,” Bathgate said. “At their core charters are successful when they have the flexibility and autonomy to run their own school and protect the needs of their students.”

A worse problem is that expanding charter schools can, paradoxically, reduce school choice, McCluskey said.

“There’s good evidence that charter schools often take kids who would otherwise have gone to private schools,” McCluskey said. “The ability to expand choice through charters may reduce overall choice by undermining schools that have a lot more autonomy [and] can be used by people who think religion is crucial to education. Although it may sound good, it could have very bad consequences.”