

Editorial: Shift to charter schools may cost taxpayers more

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Just as state Republicans are celebrating their long-pursued dream of adding charter schools, a libertarian research group that often influences their thinking has issued a cautionary study on the growth.

The Cato Institute says charter schools are drawing students away from private schools, moving their educational costs from their families to taxpayers. In 2008, the latest year for which Cato found statistics, this shift cost taxpayers an additional \$1.8 billion nationwide.

In North Carolina, the 2011 debate over adding charters involved many proposals, many of which died. Some of the failed proposals were seen as Republican attempts to move children out of home schools and into very small, home-school-like charters. Critics saw that move as an attempt to subsidize home schooling, a move that, because state education money follows the individual student to charters, would have drained significant resources from the public-school system.

The Journal has long supported charters because they serve as incubators of new educational approaches that can then be shared with traditional public schools and because they serve student populations with special needs or interests.

To be innovative, charters need the flexibility that comes with the state's current charters governance: They are free of local board control but answer to the State Board of Education on broad parameters.

Home schools offer a different experience, one less regulated than charters. The state long ago began allowing parents to choose this kind of education, but on the condition that they pay for it themselves. Now, home schooling is a family financial decision akin to registering a student in a private school.

The legislature, in recent years, has repeatedly cut public-school spending. With the growth of charters, the likelihood of private-school students transferring into them, and the possibility of a similar shift by home-schoolers, the financial implications for traditional public schools are dangerous.

The legislature must carefully watch its charter decisions. It cannot let its enthusiasm for the educational opportunities offered to a still-small segment of the population starve the system that educates the great majority of our children.