

Education Options Act Promotes Innovative Solutions Worth Trying

Everyone in Alabama wants the best education possible for our students, but it's frustrating when not everyone agrees on what is best. With the numerous layers of complexity, there is no simple or single solution for resolving all issues in Alabama's educational system. Educating tomorrow's citizens is complicated, and keeping Alabama on the path of improvement will require many different tools and constant vigilance from everyone to ensure all students have the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

Each child is unique, and the public education system must offer diverse options for educating all students, not just the ones who perform well in traditional schools. Public charter schools represent an important tool that needs to be available to help students succeed if they are not well served by traditional public schools. Charter schools are public schools that offer options to students and their families when the one-size-fits-all style of traditional schools may not provide the best opportunity for learning.

In the 20 years since the first charter school opened in Minnesota, 41 states have passed laws to allow charter schools that give students a choice in where they receive their public education. Further, charter schools can serve as catalysts for change that help all schools in a community better serve its students, not just the ones in a charter school. This benefits everyone.

Research shows that the state's charter school performance relies heavily on the strength of the state law. States with strong charter laws that hold charter schools accountable often see them outperform traditional public schools, while states with weak laws see the opposite.

Fortunately, the Education Options Act under consideration in the Alabama Legislature contains elements that are shown to foster high-performing public charter schools:

- It would allow both start-up public charter schools, while also allowing traditional schools to convert to charter schools. Nationally, about 90% of charter schools began as start-ups. These schools can bring new ideas and new energy into local school systems, and they provide choice for students and families seeking an educational atmosphere that is just the right fit. Both types of charter schools are vital, and limiting educators to one or the other could stifle innovation in Alabama's educational system.
- For groups whose charter-school application is turned down by a local school board, the act includes an appeal process to a newly created Charter Application Review Council. Local superintendents and school boards often view charter schools as a threat instead of as an opportunity to provide better educational opportunities for their students. When this happens, there must be an alternate path to approval for charter schools that can serve children well.
- It contains strong accountability provisions to ensure public charter schools serve students well and couples this with autonomy, allowing charter schools the freedom they need to be innovative and progressive. Any charter school in Alabama would be run by a non-profit, non-religious organization. All public charter school students would still have to take state assessments—just like their counterparts in traditional schools. However, the authorizer of a public charter school would have the ability to close it if it does not meet its agreed-upon performance levels, and it would be incumbent upon the authorizer to do this if children were not being well served.

(continued on page 2)

- Finally, the Education Options Act guarantees equitable funding for students who choose to attend public charter schools. If a family decides to send their child to a public charter school, they deserve to have their tax money follow that child. Anything less would be an injustice to the families providing their children with the best possible education.

Since this bill was introduced, legislators have worked to address concerns of educators around the state. The Educations Options Act would now focus on school systems with persistently low-performing schools where students need the most help and only allow for 20 schools across the state.

Research shows that students in poverty who attend public charter schools perform better than those in traditional schools. Nationwide, public charter schools are breathing new life into school systems and providing one more tool for helping to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their higher income peers.

In a state where nearly 60% of public school students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, charter schools are an option we cannot afford to ignore.

Caroline B. Novak
President, A+ Education Partnership

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