

Washington state schools, teachers under fire

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21 January 2012

The push for charter schools in Washington started in earnest with the reconvening of the state legislature.

Initiatives to allow charter schools in Washington have been voted down by the public three times in the last two decades—the last time in 2004. The bipartisan proposal to bring charter schools up for a vote within the legislature—thus avoiding a public vote—comes in the wake of the state Supreme Court’s ruling earlier this month that Washington is in violation of the state constitution’s Article IX, Section 1, which states, “It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex.”

Proposed by Rep. Eric Pettigrew (D-Seattle) and Sen. Steve Litzow (R-Mercer Island), House bill 2428 would allow charters into the state for the first time and set up a statewide “transformation zone district” to oversee the implementation thereof. Section 101,6 also opens up the possibility of current public schools being converted to charter schools. In such cases, the charter schools would be “entitled to the rent-free use of its existing facility,” with the school district responsible for its general maintenance.

According to the bill, the proposed charter schools can employ “noncertificated [uncertified] instructional staff of unusual competence and in exceptional cases.” The questions of what constitutes “unusual competence” and what other qualifications would be required are left open.

In addition, there are provisions for the firing of teachers and staff in public schools that are to be absorbed into the “transformation zone district.” The schools subject to absorption include those that have been identified as “persistently lowest performing” by the superintendent of public instruction. What defines a “lowest performing” school has not been laid out, and it is left to the superintendent to develop further criteria

for the recommendation of schools to be transferred. These recommendations could be implemented as soon as January 2013.

The handing over of low-performing schools to charters would not address the academic problems. Charter schools have repeatedly proved to be less effective on the whole than public schools. As we recently noted: “A 2009 study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University showed that only 17 percent of charter schools did significantly better than traditional schools, while 37 percent did significantly worse.”

Despite acknowledged problems of charters, the proposed bill has been greeted warmly by the local press. A *Seattle Times* editorial from January 16 notes that “Nationally, about 20 percent of charter schools have been found to do a better job of educating students than public schools,” yet ends by exhorting the state legislature to show “political courage” and pass the bill.

Senate bill 6203 and its companion bill, House bill 2427, were also introduced with bipartisan support. The bills would require the superintendent of education to establish a four-tiered rating system for teachers and principals, and allow for the firing of lower-rated teachers, regardless of seniority, in the event of budgetary shortages. Senate bill 6203 would require a committee be formed to collaborate on developing the criteria. This committee would be made up of representatives from “state associations” for the teachers and administrators, along with selected parents—in other words, the various union bureaucracies and the PTA, which has recently issued a statement in support of the introduction of charter schools in the state.

Mary Lindquist, president of the state teachers’ union, the Washington Education Association (WEA), issued a brief and tepid statement on January 12: “On

three occasions, the people of Washington have rejected charter schools at the ballot box. That's three strikes. Charter schools are little more than an unfilled promise to our students. They simply skim off those children whose parents have the time and capability to fill out endless applications." The statement concludes, "Charter schools are a distraction from the real debate and not a full funding solution."

There has been no call from the teachers' union for any sort of action against the bills.

The abandonment of the consideration for seniority is very similar to language in Section 85 of the Tacoma School District's contract that allowed for reassignment of teachers without regard to seniority. The language of Section 85 was one of the most contentious issues of the teachers' strike in September 2011 (see "Tacoma, Washington teachers strike").

At the time of the strike, Democratic governor Christine Gregoire took the unusual step of calling the Tacoma Educators Association (TEA) representatives and the school district negotiators to her office, even though negotiations were still being carried out. The concessions contract worked out under her watchful eye left the issue of seniority unsettled, as a committee to develop a "fair" policy was to be formed. The introduction of Senate bill 6203 would render such a committee moot, as it would apply statewide. It also marks a more concerted attack against teachers as it would open the door to firing the more senior, and therefore higher-paid, teachers.

Senate bill 6203's call for more stringent evaluations of teachers and principals comes as the Washington schools have seen their budgets cut for years. Teaching conditions have deteriorated as the cuts have resulted in Washington having the third most crowded classrooms in the country.

The general economic climate has also lead to increased pressure on parents, and more distressed and homeless students whose ability to learn is drastically affected by their living conditions. The recent budget cuts to social programs that help poor families in Washington are guaranteed to be made even deeper as the legislature continues the session under orders to find and cut another \$1.5 billion.

It is notable that none of these education bills, nor any other currently before the Washington state legislature, address the ruling handed down by the state

Supreme Court ordering the full funding of the school system. Rather, they result in a usurping of already inadequate funds for their diversion into privately run charter schools and an attack on hard-won workers' rights, contracts, and employment conditions for teachers.



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