

Charter backer says House proposal weakens oversight

Saturday, April 30, 2011

By [Jim Siegel](#)

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A leading school-choice supporter says the sweeping changes proposed by House Republicans would weaken oversight of charter schools severely and threaten to turn Ohio into a "laughingstock of the nation's charter-school programs."

"It's hard for me to say that," said Terry Ryan, vice president of Ohio programs and policy for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which sponsors seven charter schools in the state, including two in Columbus.

"It's basically saying the operators should be left alone and should be able to open as many schools as they want, and there shouldn't be any accountability but the market. We believe that's not enough."

As part of their changes to Gov. John Kasich's \$55.5 billion budget, which got another full hearing yesterday, House Republicans would boost the power of for-profit charter-school operators at the expense of charter-school sponsors, who are tasked with oversight of the schools.

Among the dozens of charter-school-related changes:

- Allow for-profit entities to set up schools through the Department of Education without a sponsor.
- Permit a school's governing authority to delegate any or all of its rights and responsibilities to the operator.
- Specify that funds paid to the operator by the school are not considered public funds.
- Require a governing authority to give 180 days' notice to operators before terminating a contract, and require the school to offer the operator the chance to renew its contract before seeking another operator.
- Make the renewal of a contract between a charter school and its sponsor subject to approval of the school operator.
- Allow "entities" and "groups of individuals" to form charter schools as a for-profit corporation.
- Allow an entity to sponsor up to 100 schools.

Ryan said the changes take Ohio back to the "chaos" of the early 2000s, when then-state Auditor Jim Petro issued a blistering report of the Department of Education's performance in overseeing charter schools.

"We've been down this path and it led to a number of bad schools and scandals, which were a true black eye to charter schools," he said.

Ryan also questions whether it's legal under federal law for the state to send public money directly from the Department of Education to a for-profit charter-school operator.

Rep. Ron Amstutz, R-Wooster, chairman of the House Finance Committee, said the general thrust of the changes was to "do an update and add some flexibilities that allow community schools to flourish."

There are situations where the relationship between the operator, governing authority and sponsor do not work well, he said. He also said the bill might be suffering from drafting issues as it relates to the Department of Education and accountability.

The Finance Committee will continue hearing testimony today and Monday, and it will make another set of changes on Tuesday before a vote. The full House is scheduled to vote on the budget on Thursday, sending it to the Senate.

"One of the things you do in a substitute bill is put things up the flagpole, see what kind of reactions they get and continue the vetting process," Amstutz said.

Kasich spokesman Rob Nichols offered no comment on the House charter-school changes, except to say that the governor would look them over. Ryan said he thought the governor's initial proposal struck a good balance.

Rep. Matt Lundy, D-Elyria, said charter-school performance is not deserving of expansion. "I think that instead of making the system more accountable, we made it easier to grow and expand," he said.

He also suggested that the amendments are the result of some influential charter-school operators, including David Brennan, the state's largest operator, who in the past decade has given Ohio Republicans more than \$4.2million, making him the party's second-largest donor.

Amstutz said Brennan did not write any of the amendments.

William Lager, who runs the online charter school eCOT, is 10th on the GOP money list.

Kasich proposed lifting the moratorium on new charter schools, setting up potential competition for eCOT, but the House proposed to delay that until July 2013.

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