

Issue Brief: Charter Schools

The intent of New York's Charter Schools Act was to allow for the establishment of models of academic innovation that were free of bureaucratic regulation but would be held strictly accountable for their performance. Unfortunately, New York's law funded this experiment by diverting money away from its traditional public schools.

In order to earn points for the state's application for the Race to the Top competitive federal grant (\$700m), Governor Paterson proposed legislation to lift the statewide cap on the number of charter schools from 200 to 400 without making any changes to charter school law. The charter school component is a small portion (40 points) of which the cap is 8 points out of a total 500. If awarded, half the money would go to the state education department and a large portion of the remainder to Title I and charter schools. There would be little left for the remaining public school districts. Without addressing the inherent inequities and funding problems within NYS' York State's charter school laws, this race for dollars could have long term consequences.

While a number of NYC charter schools have met the standard of improving achievement, many charter schools have failed. In reality, the implementation of the Act has, in certain areas of the state such as Albany, Schenectady and Buffalo, led to unintended consequences in that these communities are suffering serious financial drain on traditional public school programs, and there is no local recourse.

The proposed 2010-11 Executive Budget would freeze public school payments to charter schools at current levels, even though public school operating aid would be reduced, but transition aid to school districts that enroll a high percentage of charter school pupils would be increased by \$3.7 million to a total of \$21.84 million.

Fair funding of public education has been a priority of the NYS PTA. NYS PTA seeks to address the negative financial impact of charter schools on traditional public schools. The Charter School Act provides for per pupil funds to be drawn from school district operating expenses; requires that textbooks, transportation, computer software, library materials and health and welfare services be provided; and, in the event of contingency budgets, the requirement to finance a charter school may result in having to eliminate or cut programs in traditional public schools of a district. Districts take an additional financial hit when students who signed to attend charter schools change their minds and return to the district or if a charter school closes mid-year.

NYS PTA acknowledges charter schools as an avenue to school reform and supports actions that rationally invest in innovation and experimentation. It is the hope of the NYS PTA that charter schools be held accountable for producing measurable and sustainable gains for all students. To ensure the promise of modeling innovative public education, charter schools must be open to all students, adhere to state and federal laws governing public schools, include meaningful parent involvement, be accountable to local school boards, and be funded in a way that does not undermine the opportunity to provide students in traditional public schools with excellence in education and quality of life.