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CALIFORNIA LABOR FEDERATION * STATE BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION TRADES COUNCIL

FACT SHEET
AB 1505 (O'Donnell)
CHARTER SCHOOL REFORM

Purpose

To empower locally elected school boards to make informed decisions about charter schools and give them greater accountability and oversight over these schools.

Background

When California's charter school law was signed back in 1992, it was a way of allowing a small number of schools to operate free from most laws, so they could experiment and use innovative ideas in public schools.

At the time, charter schools were capped at only 100 schools. They were to be used as laboratories of learning that could be shared with traditional schools to push them to be better.

Over the years, charter schools have morphed from a limited number of schools to over 1,300. Since the removal of that cap, the exponential growth of the charter industry over the last 20 years has not coincided with necessary increases in oversight and strengthened accountability.

As more and more public money flows to private groups that manage charter schools, districts like Oakland and San Diego are closing neighborhood schools, laying off teachers, and cutting programs to keep the lights on.¹

School boards are forced to approve charter schools if some limited criteria have been met, even over the board's objection. School boards cannot even consider the financial impact of a charter school on the district when determining approval or rejection of a charter.

This has led to unprecedented growth of charter schools in California. Today, charter schools outnumber school districts in this state. School districts currently have limited options in regards to authorizing, renewing, and revoking charter schools.

The requisite transparency, oversight, and accountability has not kept pace with the rapid growth of charters in California resulting in negative consequence for vulnerable students. Dozens of charter schools' websites say that they require parents to volunteer significant amounts of time to the school, an unfair deterrent to families that can't afford to do so.²

A 2016 report by the American Civil Liberties Union outlined other ways that charter schools allegedly kept out students who were less likely to succeed: creating lengthy and daunting applications, sometimes available only in English; demanding Social Security cards and other documents that would reveal a family's immigration status, discouraging applicants who weren't fluent in English; requiring documentation of special-education needs; forcing kids who'd earned low grades in previous schools to take extra classes; and expelling students who got low grades once admitted.

Current California law is proving inadequate to protect many students, families, communities, and the public at large from the consequences of reckless charter school growth.

A 2017 report from the NAACP Task Force on Quality Education stated that "with the expansion of charter schools and their concentration in low-income communities, concerns have been raised

1. "California, the Wild West of Charter Schools, Needs Common Sense Reforms", Network for Public Education, Donald Cohen (December 20, 2017).

2. "Charter-school reforms we need, and one we don't", Los Angeles Times, The Times Editorial Board, (May 13, 2017).

within the African American community about the quality, accessibility, and accountability of some charters, as well as their broader effects on the funding and management of school districts that serve most students of color.”

One way that states and districts can maintain accountability for charter schools is through their regulation of the organizations that authorize charter schools. One of the recommendations from the NAACP report was that “states should allow only districts to serve as authorizers, empower those districts to reject applications that do not meet standards, and establish policies for serious and consistent oversight.”

Across the state, parents, community organizations, superintendents, and school district staff are coming together to demand reforms that protect students, communities, and the public at large.

California must seek to strengthen the ability of charter authorizers to hold charter schools accountable for academic and fiscal outcomes. It is time for a correction in state law to return charter school authorization and oversight to the communities where the charter schools are located.

What This Bill Will Do

This bill will ensure that charter schools are authorized and overseen locally by school districts and the elected officials who understand the educational needs of their local students.

The bill gives school districts greater authority to choose which charter schools are approved in their community.

Further, this bill clarifies oversight responsibilities by requiring districts to consider the financial stability of the charter school and the services the school provides to special education and English language learner students during renewal.

Lastly, the bill corrects an inconsistency in the law, and requires that charter schools receive valuable technical assistance on the same timeline as currently provided for school districts, when they are facing academic challenges.

Sponsors

- California Labor Federation
- California School Employees Association
- California Federation of Teachers
- California Teachers Association

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