

How a Strong Charter Law Can Help Virginia's Struggling Students and Schools

by Robert Holland and Don Soifer

Virginians can take pride that an ever-increasing proportion of their public schools have pulled their Standards of Learning performance over the passing mark. However, ominous questions lurk unanswered as to what will happen to schools that continue to fall short of SOL as well as federal No Child Left Behind requirements over the next few years.

Unfortunately, Virginia has no real plan in place for dealing with the pockets of failure. The Old Dominion is missing out on opportunities to expand a range of educational options that could help struggling students and schools. Studies by the Manhattan Institute and others show that Virginia ranks near the bottom of the 50 states in the educational options it offers its children.

Such choices could be offered through the public school system if Virginia had a strong charter school law. It doesn't. Its 1998 law places rigid caps on the number and duration of charters, and provides applicants no appeal from arbitrary local school board rejections.

A strong charter law permits teachers, parents, community organizations, universities, or educational management companies to devise and operate charters according to a stated vision for education. Because charters are public schools, they are open to all who choose them and they may not charge tuition. They must produce results or face being shut down.

One way to strengthen Virginia's law would be to establish a chartering authority under the State Board of Education with power to certify outstanding charter-school applications and to consider appeals from local rejections. A state board could even charter regional schools or online schools (cybercharters) to help children without regard to district boundaries.

A meaningful appeals process would ensure that applicants who take the time to prepare careful applications will receive a fair opportunity. It could also give local school boards somewhere to turn for help with the evaluation of applications in areas where expertise is needed, such as with charter school financing plans.

In addition, charters should be issued for at least five years (as opposed to the current three) so that charter officials would have more traction for attracting support. Finally, a strong law would make clear that charter schools could hire instructors with valuable real-world experience from outside the education-school track.

In addition to fresh ideas and enthusiasm, charter schools could bring additional resources to Virginia K-12 education. States with robust charter movements receive as much as \$25 million in federal aid. School management companies make capital investments, even to the extent of building their own schools, when chartered by states that want this extra service as an option for their children. For students and schools frustrated by repeated failure, charter schools could bring reasonable hope for a turnaround.