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ALABAMA VOICES: A strong case

By Caroline Novak

Alabama leaders are discussing public charter schools as a way to improve the state's chances for up to \$200 million in federal Race to the Top funds, but the question is more important than even this quest for much-needed dollars.

Our public schools exist to educate children -- to prepare them for workforce training, college and civic life. That simple truth can guide us, especially now, when many schools are not fulfilling the mission.

That's why, starting in 1992, states have been providing "charters" to groups of teachers and parents to run public schools with more flexibility balanced by more accountability.

The purpose of charters is to develop successful public school models that increase student learning. These models can then be replicated in other public schools. Charter schools make their own faculty decisions, determine the curriculum and set the length of the school day and year.

Charter schools must follow the same course of study and pass the same state assessments as other schools. But for charter schools, failure to fulfill the mission of educating children brings consequences -- they can be closed if they don't succeed.

Public charter schools have a proven track record with poor and minority students. That's an important factor, especially here in Alabama, where more than 50 percent of our students are low-income. On average, those children are 30 points behind their more affluent classmates.

Thanks to the hard work of many educators and students, Alabama is making strides in closing that achievement gap. Our schools led the nation in gains in 4th grade reading, with low-income students making the greatest gains. And there are a growing number of elementary schools that are both high-poverty and high-performing.

But we have a long way to go to make sure all children attend a school that provides them an opportunity to graduate with the knowledge and skills they need. Because of their track record, public charter schools have earned bipartisan support both nationally and here in Alabama.

Thirty-nine states -- including most Southern states -- already have charter schools, and the lessons learned there can help us work through fears and misconceptions that have emerged.

There is no evidence that public charter schools resegregate public schools, and we can include provisions in our public charter school law to protect against it. Some states prohibit converting private schools to charter schools, and we should insist on provisions that protect civil rights.

Many charter schools make a special commitment to serve students with the greatest needs. Nationally, charter schools enroll more minority students and more low-income students than other schools.

Magnet schools are another strategy to strengthen public education. However, magnet schools and public charter schools differ in two distinct ways. First, magnets fall under the same restrictions as other public schools. Secondly, magnet schools can exclude students based on academic or other criteria. Charter schools must take all children who enroll. If interest exceeds available space, then

charter schools must have a lottery to ensure fairness.

Public education dollars are allocated based on enrollment and therefore the existing dollars would follow the students, just as they do when new schools open or zoning lines change. If a system chooses to convert a low-performing school to a charter school, then funding remains in the same building.

Bringing public charter schools to Alabama could actually increase school funding in two major ways. The Race to the Top money could be used to expand programs that are helping schools make progress such as the Alabama Reading Initiative and the Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative. And Alabama would become eligible for federal and private grants specifically targeted for charter schools.

With all the evidence that public charter schools can help our students learn more, the real challenge in Alabama is to write an effective charter school law. Education groups must be at the table so that charters will be embraced by superintendents, local boards and teachers who wish to develop a full range of strategies for improvement.

The state can learn a lot by looking at the record of charter schools across the country.

- Proper supervision -- Both local school districts and the state school board should have authority to authorize charters. Local school boards should be able to turn to public charter schools for innovation or to turn around low-performing schools. The state needs the authority to issue charters with a special focus on struggling students. Authorizers need to understand their role and be prepared to make good judgments about plans and capacity to deliver.
- Strong accountability -- Officials must be willing to make hard decisions to close public charter schools that are not fulfilling their mission.
- True flexibility -- Charter schools must meet the same academic, health and safety standards as other public schools. But they must have full flexibility from other rules and regulations. Restrictions could jeopardize the funding opportunities associated with public charter schools.
- Phased-in growth -- Deliberate expansion of public charter schools has been the most reliable approach.
- Equitable funding and facilities -- Less successful states have hampered schools by providing lower funding per student than other schools.

A+ was organized almost 20 years ago when citizens across the state agreed that students' access to top-notch public schools shouldn't be determined by their zip codes. While good progress has been made, far too many Alabama students still don't have the opportunity they deserve. That's why A+ believes it is time for charter schools in Alabama.

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