

Editorial - Other states make charter schools work, why not Washington?

By [Editorial Board](#)

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Washington was the 42nd state to approve a law allowing public charter schools.

Yet, one would think — based on the chaos that’s followed the law being struck down as unconstitutional — it was the first of the 50 states to allow public charter schools. Neither the state Legislature, state education officials nor charter school supporters seem to be near a consensus on how to fix what the state Supreme Court sees as broken.

Tacoma News Tribune reporters Debbie Cafazzo and Melissa Santos recently took a look at the situation, and this is what they found:

“So far, the only concrete ideas to emerge from the state Capitol have been to ask the court to change its mind or to strengthen traditional schools so that frustrated parents don’t have to seek alternatives. Neither approach is likely to satisfy charter school supporters.”

State officials need to find a way to make the voter-approved initiative that authorized the charter-school experiment work. Perhaps they should look to the states that are making charter schools work successfully.

State lawmakers have the power to tweak initiatives. They need to use it

Earlier this month, the state Supreme Court, in a 6-3 ruling, said the law is unconstitutional because charter schools aren’t “common schools” because they’re governed by an appointed board of directors. Therefore, Chief Justice Barbara Madsen wrote, “money that is dedicated to common schools is unconstitutionally diverted to charter schools.”

The News Tribune reporters talked to Hugh Spitzer, an acting University of Washington law professor, who said an option is to have charter schools funded with money from a separate government account that doesn’t include money raised through the state’s common schools levy.

That’s not gaining much traction because the state already faces a Supreme Court order to fully fund basic education. A special fund for charter schools won’t be received well by the high court justices.

Another approach could be changing charter schools to resemble alternative schools that already operate in some districts, Spitzer said.

Such schools could have separate site councils that help set school policies, and more flexibility with their curriculum, Spitzer said — but unlike the schools authorized by the 2012 initiative, they would be overseen by public school superintendents and locally elected school boards.

This concept has merit. The trick, however, would be to set up a system in which state and local oversight would not be so unbending as to strangle the creativity that makes charter schools successful in other states.

Some don't want the state to have any control, some want it to have all the control.

Ultimately, compromise is needed. It's working in dozens of other states, and it should be able to work in Washington.