

Justices should reconsider illogical charter-school ruling

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Seattle Times Illustration

Problems in public education, such as poor outcomes for low-income and minority students, will persist in traditional public schools if charter schools are shut down.

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

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IN their all-too-brief history in Washington state, charter schools spotlighted the pressing need to provide specialized, high-quality education for all students — especially kids of color and low-income students.

The future of the state's nine charter schools is unclear following the state Supreme Court's 6-3 ruling that found fault with the way the state funds them.

But not so fast. State Attorney General Bob Ferguson, along with the Washington State Charter Schools Association, the League of Education Voters and other respondents have filed a motion for the court to reconsider its September ruling.

The court should do so.

In the motion, Ferguson argues that the state funds various types of schools with public dollars that are not overseen by publicly elected boards. Also, the court's ruling seems inconsistent in that two charter schools that opened in Spokane are overseen by the local school district.

Washington voters approved charter schools in 2012 to create a publicly funded alternative to traditional public schools, which too often have spotty records of serving all students. The initiative prioritized the need to serve at-risk students.

This past year, black, Hispanic and Native American students in Washington consistently scored 15 to 20 percentage points lower than white and Asian students on standardized tests from third grade through high school, according to the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

The charter-school law allows schools the discretion to try approaches like focusing on specialized curriculum or extending the school year, class periods and school days to provide more teaching. Those attributes drove hundreds of parents to enroll more than 1,300 children in charter schools this fall.

About 70 percent of the students who enrolled in charter schools are kids of color, said Tom Franta, chief executive of the Washington State Charter Schools Association.

At each of the nine charter schools, more than half of students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches, and at four schools, the total was more than 75 percent, according to the attorney general's request to keep the schools open for the remainder of the school year.

At eight of the schools, 10 percent or more of the students receive special-education services. English-language learners are also represented with 30 percent of the students at one school and at least 10 percent at three other schools.

This past year, the state Legislature committed significantly more funds to K-12 education to fulfill the McCleary court order, which requires the state to fully fund basic education. That mandate includes limiting class sizes from kindergarten through third grade at the same time as enrollment is growing and many schools are already operating above capacity.

Critics of Washington's charter schools mislead when they say charters take money away from traditional public schools. Charter schools are part of the solution of fulfilling demand for more classroom space and providing more options for parents and students.

If the state Supreme Court does not change its position, state lawmakers should find a way to fix the charter law in the next session. Either way, Washington's public schools must do a better job reaching underserved students and fostering the flexibility and innovation charter schools promised.

Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Ryan Blethen, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Jonathan Martin, Thanh Tan, Blanca Torres, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).