

# Lawmakers float proposal to keep charter schools

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**Spokane lawmakers propose “district charter schools,” which would have more flexibility than typical schools, but answer to elected school boards.**

By [John Higgins](#)

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Two state senators from Spokane will propose a measure in the upcoming legislative session aimed at saving charter schools in Washington by allowing school districts to contract with nonprofit organizations to run charters within district boundaries.

Sen. Andy Billig, D-Spokane, and Sen. Michael Baumgartner, R-Spokane, are [co-sponsors of the bill](#), which they think would pass constitutional muster because the charters would be directly accountable to an elected school board.

The 2016 legislative session begins next week.

The Washington State Supreme Court [ruled Sept. 4](#) that the state’s charter-school law is unconstitutional, largely because as charters now operate, they are governed by appointed rather than elected boards.

In November, the court rejected several motions to reconsider its decision by a 5-4 vote.

That overturned a law that voters approved in 2012, which passed after several failed attempts to bring charters to Washington state. Under that law, a state commission was created with the power to authorize charter schools. School districts could be charter authorizers, too, but not with direct control over charter operations.

Billig said that under his proposed bill, school districts would have much tighter control over the charter schools, with more freedom to revoke contracts or choose not to renew them.

The charters still would differ from other public schools, with the power to decide the length of the school day and year, staffing levels, and how to train, hire and fire staff.

They also would have their own privately appointed boards, but the elected school board would have to approve the details, which doesn't occur now.

"Quite frankly, I think it has to be truly overseen by the school board," Billig said.

"Otherwise it's not going to be constitutional."

Billig said the charter schools he envisions would be similar to ones that operate in the [Boston](#) and [Los Angeles](#) public-school systems.

In Boston, 21 out of the district's 125 schools are "pilot" charter schools, operating in a partnership among the mayor, the district superintendent and the city's teachers union, according to the district's website.

Billig said staff in his proposed district charter schools would have the right to collectively bargain, but lawmakers would have to sort out how that would work and make sure federal labor laws are followed.

Tom Franta, leader of the Washington State Charter Schools Association advocacy group, said he had not read the proposed bill yet but was glad something is in the works.

To Franta, the fact that Billig is sponsoring the bill means there is broad support in both the House and the Senate, and from Democrats as well as Republicans. Billig is the deputy leader of the Democratic caucus in the Senate.

Meanwhile, one charter has [reverted to a private school](#), and several others continue to receive public money as a type of alternative school, known as "Alternative Learning Environment," or ALE.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn [amended](#) the ALE enrollment rules last month to allow for a quick transition intended to keep students in their charter schools until the end of the school year.

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