

Washington lawmakers discuss bills to revive charter schools

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SEATTLE (AP) — State lawmakers heard testimony Tuesday on two proposed legal fixes to the state's charter school system, with a plan to bring charter schools under the control of local school boards appearing to attract the most enthusiasm.

Lawmakers are seeking a way to answer last fall's state Supreme Court ruling that found Washington's charter school system was unconstitutional. The justices had a problem with the new public schools getting state money but not being controlled by a voter-elected school board.

Much, but not all, of the testimony from parents, teachers and education advocates was positive about the proposals. Students who attend some of Washington's first charter schools were among the people testifying before the Senate Education Committee, and they strongly encouraged lawmakers to keep their schools open next year.

Jackie Reyes, a sixth-grader at Green Dot Destiny Middle School in Tacoma, said the school has encouraged her to do things like public speaking and give more thought to college.

"My friends and I love going to this school," Reyes said. "You can really make a difference with this decision."

Star Ortega, a student at Summit Olympus high school in Tacoma, said her new school allowed her to escape a bad situation in her traditional public schools because she has difficulty with academics and social activity in schools.

Now Ortega says she expects to be the first person from her family to graduate from college. "Summit Olympus is not just a special school, but a community I am proud to be part of," she said.

Washington has eight open charter schools. The ninth school switched back to being a private school after the Supreme Court ruling. The eight schools have been able to stay open for the year, thanks in part to help from the Mary Walker School District in Stevens County, which made use of the state's Alternative Learning Experience law.

Many people expressed support for Senate Bill 6163 that would bring all charter schools under the authorization and control of local school boards. Another proposal, Senate Bill 6194, would mirror the voter initiative, with a change in the way the schools are financed. The proposal would use money from the fund that receives state lottery money to pay for charter schools.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn, representatives of statewide administrator and school board associations, and a speaker for Spokane Public Schools

all expressed support for the idea of bringing charter schools under the umbrella of local school boards.

The teachers union, some lawmakers and some members of the public spoke out against both proposals. They all encouraged the committee to focus its efforts on finding a way to fully pay for the state's much larger public school system that educates more than a million school children, rather than just over a thousand students currently enrolled in Washington charter schools.