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State Senate votes new money source for charter schools

BY JOEL CONNELLY, SEATTLEPI.COM Updated 2:55 pm, Wednesday, January 20, 2016



Washington Lt. Gov. Brad Owen, center, counts votes on the Senate floor as Keith Buchholz, right, and Jeannie Gorrell, left, both with Senate Counsel, look on, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2016, at the Capitol in Olympia, Wash. The Washington Senate passed a bill that seeks a legal fix to the state's charter schools in light of a state Supreme Court ruling that found the system unconstitutional. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

The Washington state Senate has voted for a legal "fix" that will allow the state's nine charter schools to continue receiving public dollars, after a state Supreme Court decision that ruled illegal the financing mechanism created by a 2012 initiative.

The legislation goes to the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives where its fate is uncertain.

"I believe we have an obligation to more than 1,200 students attending charter schools to allow them to stay at the schools they have come to depend on to meet their educational needs," said state Sen. Mark Mullet, D-Issaquah, a cosponsor of the bipartisan legislation.

"I fear if we don't do something to protect these charter schools, they will become a private option only available to families who have money," added Mullet.

Melissa Pailthorp, whose daughter attends a racially diverse charter school in the International District, cheered the Senate's action.

"Hugely happy that our senators heard how the schools are serving kids and specifically and meaningfully taking a bit out of our state's significant achievement gap," she said. "Fingers crossed that the other chamber will also put the kids first."

The state's voters narrowly backed charter schools in 2012. The state's technology billionaires invested millions of dollars in the initiative. The Washington Education Association fiercely opposed the measure, but lacked resources to mount a "No" campaign.

In a 6-3 ruling delivered on the Friday before Labor Day, however, the Supreme Court said money sources used to fund the state's common (public) schools could not pay for operation of charter schools.

Since the ruling charter school students and their parents have been rallying to save the schools. Pro-charter school ads also have been appearing on television.



IMAGE 1 OF 10

Hundreds of students rally at Summit Sierra public charter school in Seattle's International District. Charter school students, parents and staff rallied to support the schools and to call for Governor Jay ... [more](#)

Charter schools are run by independent boards and not by local school districts.

The Senate bill, passed on a 27-20 vote, would fund charter schools out of the state's Opportunities Pathways Account, consisting of money from the state lottery. State lottery money is not restricted to charter schools.

"We must continue to fund innovative ways to ensure all children have access to a great education, one that prepares them to enter and succeed in college and compete for a good job," said state Sen. Steve Litzow, R-Mercer Island, who chairs the Senate's education committee.

Gov. Jay Inslee has been heard once on the issue.

Shortly after the Supreme Court ruling, the governor took a critical view of charter schools, saying they divert resources at a time when the Legislature is under court order to fully fund K-12 education in the state.

Sen. Pramila Jayapal, a Democrat from Seattle, argued that the Legislature shouldn't be addressing charter schools while the state remains under a contempt order from the state Supreme Court, according to The Associated Press. In a 2012 ruling, known as the McCleary case, the court said the state was not meeting its paramount duty to fully fund basic education.

"There is a systematic disinvestment in our public school system in this state," she said. "We can't substitute a solution on 1,200 kids in charter schools when we have not even begun to have a real discussion in this body about how we address the million kids around the state."

The 27-20 Senate vote does not constitute a veto-proof majority.

(Editor's note: A family member of this writer attends a charter school, and another relative is quoted in this story.)

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