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Charter schools: Tricky, dangerous issue for Gov. Jay Inslee

BY JOEL CONNELLY, SEATTLEPI.COM Updated 1:08 pm, Tuesday, February 2, 2016

Washington voters, by the barest of margins, voted in 2012 to allow the setup of charter schools, after three previous rejections of proposals to create independently run, publicly financed schools.

But support for charter schools has since grown. It has been galvanized by reaction to the pre-Labor Day ruling by the Washington Supreme Court, which threw out not only the state funding formula but also the entire 2012 initiative.

The result is a potential "wedge" issue in the 2016 race for governor.

Seattle Port Commissioner Bill Bryant, GOP challenger to Gov. Jay Inslee, has embraced and toured charter schools and taken up the cause of 1,200 students whose future education was thrown into doubt by the Supremes.

"We have a governor who will close schools that are meeting education needs of the most disadvantaged in our midst," Bryant told Republicans' Roanoke Conference last Saturday night.

Inslee has argued that the Legislature's focus should be on fixing public schools under the Supreme Court's McCleary ruling, which required full state funding of K-12 education.

"My focus will remain on basic education: Some families look to charter schools out of frustration with their local public school," Inslee said recently. "The answer is to remain committed to improving our public K-12 system and making sure every child has a local public school that meets his or her needs."

The Republican-run state Senate has found a pot of money and passed legislation that would fund charter schools out of state lottery proceeds.

The legislation has moved to the Democratic controlled House of Representatives, where the Washington Education Association has wielded great power. The WEA has been a center of opposition to charter schools.

"If the Democrats don't get on board with this, they're going to get rolled over," Michael Orbino, chairman of Summit Public Schools Washington, said on a panel at Roanoke. Orbino, a self described liberal voter, is a Bryant backer.

Is he right? Some factors influencing the charter schools battle:

- Charter schools are making a favorable impression. As public school teacher strikes loomed post-Labor Day, reporters found the school year already underway for three weeks at the Summit Sierra charter school in Seattle's International District. Hundreds of charter school students would descend on Olympia to lobby, just as the Supreme Court was refusing to reconsider its ruling.
- Charter schools supporters have deep pockets. The state's technology billionaires invested millions in passage of the 2012 initiative. A lobby group, Act Now for Washington Students, is up with TV spots featuring charter school students. Opponents have scoffed at Act Now as an "Astroturf" group -- it is backstopped by public relations professionals -- but the group appears able to mobilize genuine grass roots support.
- The WEA is hurting: A past president of the WEA, appointed state Rep. Carol Gregory, D-Federal Way, was handily defeated by Republican Teri Hickel in a 2015 special election in the South King County-Pierce County 30th Legislative District. The Democrats' longstanding state House majority has eroded down to a bare 50-48 seat majority.
- Democrats' support for charter schools is building. State Sens. Mark Mullet, D-Issaquah and Steve Hobbs, D-Lake Stevens, both from swing districts, worked with Republican colleagues on the Senate rescue plan. Several House Democrats, notably Rep. Eric Pettigrew, D-Seattle, are backers. So is a group called Democrats for Education Reform, and such bipartisan groups as the League of Education Voters.

"Behind the scenes, they (the WEA) know there needs to be a fix," said Lisa McFarlane, state director of Democrats for Education Reform.

All of this leaves Gov. Inslee in a tricky position.

The Democratic governor has experienced labor pains. Boeing Machinists are still mad at Inslee for endorsing a contract with concessions, and Longshore union members were not happy when he jointed opposition to basing the Shell Arctic drilling fleet in Seattle.

The governor dare not anger the Washington Education Association or reform-resistant Seattle liberals, but risks being on the unpopular side of a high-profile issue.

Interestingly, Bill Bryant isn't gloating over his opponent's discomfort.

In an aside at Roanoke, Bryant indicated that he might back off a bit on charter school advocacy, to allow room for the Legislature to find and pass a funding fix.

"I don't want this to be viewed as 'Bill vs. Jay,'" said Bryant. "I want them (legislators) to get this done."

(Editor's note: A family member of this writer attends a charter school.)

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