

'Huge donations' by Gates Foundation and others behind effort to save charter schools

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Eric Murphy, a seventh-grade humanities teacher at Excel Public Charter School in Kent. Excel Public Charter School has joined the Mary Walker School District. The school has 130 students. (Ellen M. Banner/The Seattle Times)

The campaign to keep charter schools open is organized and well-funded, with millions at its disposal. But the future of the charter-school system in Washington is uncertain.

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By [Paige Cornwell](#)

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Shirline Wilson thought she had found the perfect fit for her 12-year-old son at Rainier Prep, a charter school in Seattle's Highline neighborhood — a place where she hoped he would get more support for his mild learning disabilities.

As soon as school started, he seemed excited to go to class each morning, a big change from the difficult experiences he'd had at previous schools.

But days later, the state Supreme Court ruled that Washington's charter schools are unconstitutional, overturning the 2012 law that allowed them to operate in this state.

That threw Wilson and her family into another crisis — this time to keep her son's school open. She joined a well-organized, well-funded lobbying campaign that's included rallies at the Capitol, free transportation for parents and students who want to testify in Olympia, and television ads featuring happy students and worried parents.

So far, the Washington State Charter Schools Association, a nonprofit advocacy group, has spent at least \$1.3 million for the campaign for a legislative fix. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation alone has given at least \$5.2 million to help Washington charters this school year.

Last month, the Senate voted 27-20 in favor of a bill that would maintain the state's charter schools largely as is but change their funding from the state's general fund, which the supreme court said was unconstitutional, to revenues from the state lottery. Two other bills, one in the Senate and one in the House, also are in the mix.

That has raised the hopes of supporters like Wilson, who says she's confident a bill will pass.

"I feel more certain about our future than I ever have before," Wilson said.

But the future of Washington's charters is far from certain, with strong opposition from many Democrats in the House, and groups including the state administrators association and the state teachers union.

Opponents say lawmakers should focus first on fully funding regular public schools, and the executive director of the Washington Association of School Administrators has questioned the motives of those pumping money into the save-charters campaign.

"Even if these huge donations are purely motivated by a desire to better serve our students, is it OK for a few wealthy individuals to effectively buy democracy in our state to promote their ideas?" Bill Keim wrote.

Foundation support

For the time being, eight of the state's first nine charters are getting by, with some getting financial help from the Charter Schools Association, which has received more than \$9 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in the last two years alone.

The eight all continue to operate as free, public schools — as envisioned under the 2012 charter initiative. Together, they enroll about 1,100 students in Seattle, Highline, Kent, Tacoma and Spokane.

The ninth — First Place Scholars in Seattle — returned to operating as a private school in December. First Place had been a tuition-free private school for decades before becoming the first charter in the state two years ago.

Six of the eight have signed contracts with the small Mary Walker School District in Eastern Washington, operating as what's known as alternative learning experiences, or ALEs, a model often used by online schools. That district is led by Kevin Jacka, a former member of the now-defunct state agency that approved and oversaw charters. Under those agreements, the charter schools' students are technically part of the Mary Walker district, but they continue to attend their charters.

Mary Walker has received \$2.1 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to support the charter partnerships.

The district also receives about \$6,300 in state dollars for each ALE student, said Nathan Olson of the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. The district then gives most of that money to the charters, minus an administrative fee.

As charters, the amount schools received per student ranged from \$5,875 to \$11,523, according to OSPI data, the same amount as other public schools.

To make up any gaps between what they had received and what they get now, some charters have received supplemental funding from the Charter Schools Association, according to spokeswoman Maggie Meyers. She didn't specify how much each has received.

The two other charters — Summit Sierra in Seattle and Summit Olympus in Tacoma — decided to move to a home-school system. But they, too, continue to operate as they have from the beginning of the school year.

“We, first and foremost, are focused on ensuring our families and students have the exact same education they have received since we opened in August,” said Jen Wickens, Summit’s chief regional officer.

Summit had planned to open a third Washington charter in West Seattle in fall 2016 — approved before the Supreme Court ruling — but that school is now on hold. Green Dot, a Los Angeles-based organization that operates multiple charter schools in three states, planned to open a school in Seattle next fall, too, which would have been its second school in Washington state. Instead, it’s focusing on Destiny Middle School, already operating in Tacoma.

Assessing uncertainty

So far, the uncertainty about the future of charters doesn’t seem to be driving families out — less than 10 percent of the students who started last fall have left, said Meyers of the Charter Schools Association. And she said the association attributes the enrollment decline to factors unrelated to the Supreme Court decision, such as transportation and scheduling conflicts.

And the pro-charter lobbying effort has succeeded in garnering sympathy from some lawmakers who opposed charters in the past — not for the charter operators, but the families who started this fall thinking they would be able to attend their new schools for years. Sen. Mark Mullet, D-Issaquah, for example, wasn’t a vocal supporter of charter schools in 2012, but this year co-sponsored the Senate bill to keep charters alive.

“I definitely don’t think a ‘yes’ on this bill means you are this huge supporter of charter schools,” he said. “It means, ‘Wow, I don’t want to screw over all these students and families who really like their schools.’ ”

Opponents, however, continue to urge lawmakers to oppose legislation that would keep charters alive.

“Diverting scarce funding to unaccountable, privately-run charter schools isn’t a solution,” state teachers union spokesman Rich Wood said.

And Keim, of the school- administrators association, asked whether the decision to open charters this fall, despite the pending court challenge, was a calculated move “to make sure there were student faces at the center of this debate” — an argument supporters dismiss.

In the meantime, districts where the eight charter schools are located are starting to think about how they will absorb charter students if the eight remaining charters end up closing.

That might not be easy for districts such as Highline, which is short on space even without the 160 students that now attend Rainier Prep. If Summit were to close, Seattle Public Schools also would have an additional 130 students in its already overcrowded schools.

This story, originally published Feb. 3, has been corrected. State Sen. Mark Mullet, D-Issaquah, was not a vocal advocate of charter schools in 2012, but did vote as a private citizen for the ballot initiative that brought charters to this state.

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