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## Rescue charter schools and keep experiment alive

Early test results at three Tacoma campuses show promise

Bill that would keep doors open has passed Senate; prospects uncertain in House

Approving it would give Supreme Court cover for bad ruling



A stream of supporters heads into Tacoma's Destiny Middle School for "a rally in support of school choice" in September, days after a Supreme Court decision that may ultimately kill charter schools. Staff file, 2015 Drew Perine

From the editorial board

The News Tribune

Five months have passed since charter schools were declared unconstitutional in a [stupefying split decision](#) by the Washington Supreme Court. Backers of the publicly funded, privately operated schools, approved by state voters in 2012, could have reacted by pulling the plug on their start-up network serving 1,100 students.

This would have made teachers unions and other charter naysayers (here's looking at you, Tacoma School Board) as giddy as a schoolboy on the first day of summer.

Instead, the state's eight charter schools have desperately lobbied legislators for relief and scratched up philanthropic funds to stay open until relief comes – if it comes. In Tacoma, where [three schools](#) are a laboratory for the charter movement, teachers are immersed in their first year shaping the lives of more than 300 students whose families determined the public school system wasn't a good fit.

It's too soon to take full measure of Washington's charter experiment. Five months isn't sufficient to tell whether the schools will shift paradigms, reverse the fortunes of disadvantaged urban students and disprove fears that scarce resources will be drained from traditional public schools.

But positive early results in Tacoma should give state lawmakers enough reason to keep the test labs open.

SOAR Academy is the local option for elementary-age children. Its winter test scores haven't been released, but if they resemble the progress at the other two charter campuses, teachers at the Hilltop school will have something to smile about.

Destiny Middle School, located in the Dometop neighborhood, is giving a math lesson to charter skeptics based on the number 80. Destiny's enrollment is more than 80 percent minority and more than 80 percent low-income children, 80 percent of whom arrived last fall below grade level in reading and math. Their winter scores show that a third of students have grown by at least one grade level.

Destiny also excels with foster kids and homeless youth, and has become a magnet for special-education students.

Nearby stands Summit Olympus High School, where nearly half the students entered classes last fall an average of four years below grade level. They've since doubled the national average in reading gains and tripled it in math, according to Summit's new batch of scores. Some of the biggest improvements were recorded by Hispanic students, who comprise half the student body.

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Summit is limited to ninth-graders in its inaugural year, but it plans to add 10th through 12th grades over the next few years – although that expansion, as with the very survival of charter schools, hangs on the tender mercies of the Legislature.

The only current hope for rescue rests with [Senate Bill 6194](#), which passed the Senate and is set for a House committee hearing Friday. It would move charter funds into a pot controlled by the Lottery, thus addressing the Supreme Court's chief complaint – that restricted K-12 “common school” money is now mixed up with dollars spent by nonprofit charter boards unaccountable to voters.

While the bill looks like a shell game, it gives the six justices the accounting solution they asked for. Other constitutional concerns raised by Democrats – not enough voice by elected school boards and the state school superintendent in charter operations – seem like speed bumps that can be smoothed over.

Hope springs eternal that the high court, given a chance to make amends for its wrongheaded ruling in September, will accept this remedy.

Some education establishment types say bailing out charter schools must not get in the way of meeting public school obligations mandated by a different Supreme Court ruling, the now-infamous [McCleary decision](#) – as if the two are mutually exclusive.

But look at it this way: The worst consequence of not solving the McCleary crisis is a foregone conclusion. Lawmakers will remain in [contempt of court](#) another few years and levy collections will stay out-of-whack, but public schools will open in September as usual.

The worst consequence of not fixing the charter crisis? Classrooms will be dark next fall, sending hundreds of at-risk Washington students into education exile.

And a bold experiment underway in 42 other states will end here without a fair chance to prove critics wrong.

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