

Charter school mirage

Like an unwelcome relative at family gatherings, the push for charter schools has returned to Kentucky.

Politically, it needs to be taken seriously. Charter schools have had support in the past in the state Senate, and Senate President David Williams supported them during his unsuccessful Republican campaign for governor last year. Previous bids to authorize charter schools have died in the House, but there are some high-stakes issues confronting the General Assembly — expanded gambling, tax reform, a bid to create a state university in Pikeville, painful budget cuts — that could prompt game-changing bargains. Gov. Steve Beshear, who has seemed open to charter schools, can't be counted on as a last line of defense.

But charter schools should not be approached as a political matter — or even as a financial one. (Some education officials and advocates argue that Kentucky must create charter schools in order to win Race to the Top federal dollars, but that actually is not a requirement.)

Charter schools are offered as an educational remedy. They are chartered by states, receive public money (and often funds from private foundations) and are technically public schools that cannot charge tuition and must offer open enrollment on a space available basis. But they are largely organized outside the daily operational control of state and local officials. In return, they agree to be held accountable for meeting results specified in the charter.

That has sounded good to some parents in other states, but the single most important

consideration is that charter schools overall do not do as well as traditional public schools — even though charter schools generally can boot out children who don't perform well.

A national assessment of charter schools in 2009 by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University found that only 17 percent of charter schools reported academic gains that were notably superior to those of traditional public schools, 37 percent showed gains that were worse, and 46 percent of charter schools showed no significant difference.

Moreover, they are simply not needed in Kentucky. Like charter schools, site-based management councils, under the KERA education reform, can make decisions for each school that supersede a school board's authority. For all the hand-wringing, public schools in Jefferson County and statewide have been making significant progress in national rankings without charter schools.

And, at a time of cutbacks, this is no time to divert money from public schools.

Nationally, the charter school movement often has an anti-union ideological component. But in Kentucky, that would be creating a clash with unionized teachers that doesn't exist now. Jefferson County teachers, to take one example, have agreed to modify significant traditional seniority-based processes on teacher assignments, particularly at persistently low-achieving schools.

Everyone wants to make Kentucky's schools better. Charter schools are the wrong way to do it.