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Malloy calls for new charter schools, with some new rules

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Gov. Dannel P. Malloy is proposing a 30 percent increase per student in charter school funding and the opening of five new charter schools.

That 30 percent increase -- to \$12,000 per student -- includes a new requirement that each local school district pay \$1,000 per student to the charter school that enrolls that student.

"What I am looking for is an embracing of our choices, of our menu of opportunities," Malloy said Monday at a public school in Hartford.

The total state cost of the boost in charter funding would be \$9.7 million.

The governor's proposals -- made two days before the opening of the 2012 legislative session -- respond to frequent statements from charter school officials that their schools are chronically underfunded, and that it's been nearly impossible to open a new charter school in the state.

"This is beyond overdue," said Dacia Toll, the leader of Achievement First charter schools, which enrolls half the state's charter students. "We were really naive to think we could get better results for less money."

Toll's network of charters in Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven currently receives \$9,400 for each student it enrolls, or 25 percent less than the nearby neighborhood school receives to enroll that same student, she said.

"We are closing the gap," Malloy said.

Not everyone's happy

Malloy's proposal regarding local districts' required \$1,000 per student contribution was immediately flagged.

"That is very concerning for us. You don't save \$1,000 every time one of your students leaves for a charter school," said Joe Cirusuolo, the leader of the state superintendents' association. "This could cost some districts a lot of money."

That requirement would cost New Haven \$1.5 million for the 1,500 students currently attending charter schools, and it would cost Bridgeport, which has a long history of funding impasses, \$1.3 million.

But Malloy seems unconcerned by the money these districts stand to lose.

"They are our schools and our students," he told a crowd of charter students during his visit Monday to the SAND Elementary School in Hartford. Malloy did say that other plans might offset the costs for those districts.

Christina Kishimoto, Hartford's superintendent, made a point of telling the state's education commissioner that her district does send some charter schools \$2,000 for each Hartford student they enroll.

"Good. It's the right thing to do," said Commissioner Stefan Pryor, who helped Toll open New Haven's Amistad Academy.

But Hartford is not helping its other charter school, Jumoke Academy, because of budget limitations.

"It would be very expensive for us to do that," she said. "We are looking into it."

Malloy's proposal would require the city of Hartford to send Jumoke \$432,000 each year for the 432 Hartford students it enrolls.

A quasi 'Money follows the child' approach

Charter advocates for years have called on the state to pay for students in the districts they actually attend, an approach referred to as "Money Follows the Child." Last year, dozens of parents flocked to the State Capitol complex wearing bright yellow T-shirts with "fund my child fairly" written on them.

Malloy's proposal calls on the state's charters to be included in the funding formula that allocates money to traditional public schools. But he would not disclose whether actual student enrollment would be the underlying factor in determining how much both public and charter schools will receive.

Critics say state funding for public schools should no longer include students who don't even attend their schools, but who instead attend charters.

Mary Loftus Levine, the leader of the state's largest teachers union, called the proposed \$1,000 requirement essentially a small-scale "money follows the child" approach.

"You are taking funding away from already strapped schools and sending it to charters," she said. "I don't think that's going to go over really well."

A national report card based on 2011 state charter school laws ranked the state in 29th place for its laws. The U.S. Department of Education, however, gave the state high scores for the changes legislators made in 2010 to charter school laws for its Race to the Top application.

Toll said the governor's plan is welcomed, but that it does little to allay her long-term concerns about charter school funding.

"We are still funded on an arbitrary number," she said of the new \$12,000 per student reimbursement. Charter schools also will remain ineligible for transportation reimbursements or for infrastructure expenses, such as building repairs or purchasing computers.

"We hoped for a permanent final answer, but this increased funding will at least stabilize our high-performing charter schools," she said.

States are mixed on their approaches to funding charter schools, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. In several states, money directly follows the child to whatever school he or she attends, while others, like Connecticut, use a set sum.

A snail's pace

Those who have tried to open new charter schools have faced an uphill battle. Just two of the 20 applications the state has received over the past six years have succeeded and led to the opening of new schools.

Connecticut has one of the nation's lowest percentages of students attending charter schools, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

To catch up with the national rate, the five new charter schools that Malloy is proposing would have to accommodate an additional 11,000 students. The governor's plan allots \$5.5 million for a variety of seats in new choice programs. If every penny were to go to charters, those new schools could accommodate 500 new seats.

"We are headed in the right direction," Pryor said.

Same funding, different students

Malloy's plan also calls on the state to give preference to those schools that would mirror the demographics of their community, when deciding which new charter schools should open.

This responds to a routine complaint among public school leaders, who say that charter schools "aren't teaching the same students we are," as Meriden Superintendent Mark Benigni said during a recent meeting of the panel discussing how the state should fund schools. "We take everyone," Benigni said of public schools.

Malloy's plan calls for the state to give charters with plans to attract special education and English-language learning students to be given preference.

"This is heading in the right direction," said Loftus Levine, who has also routinely said comparing charters to public schools is like comparing apples to oranges.

Kishimoto said that oversight on charter school enrollment is a welcome change.

"They have nowhere near the number of English learners or special education students that we have," she said. "That needs to change. These schools need to enroll everyone."

A report by the University of Colorado's Education and the Public Interest Center found that charter schools in Connecticut are not responsible for providing a full range of education services.

Kishimoto said that because charters lack tailored special education or English-learning programs, those students are not applying and are staying in the public schools. Five percent of Achievement First charter students in Hartford are English-language learning students compared with 18 percent in the city's public schools.

"We should assist in the ability of charter schools to reach these high-need student populations, while also implementing requirements to ensure that those who can benefit most from this schooling are targeted. This proposal will do just that," Malloy said.

Education

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