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Georgia charter schools don't outperform traditional schools, report says

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Charter schools have become less successful than traditional schools in meeting federally mandated annual yearly progress targets, a report to the state Department of Education shows.

The report, presented to the state Board of Education Wednesday, also said graduation rates at charter schools are about the same as the state average.

The findings are sure to be a factor in the high-stakes fight brewing in the Legislature over charter schools, which are public schools that have been granted some freedom from state mandates in exchange for innovation.

Last week the state House of Representatives fell 10 votes short of getting the required two-thirds majority needed to put a constitutional amendment before voters that would give the state more authority to approve charter schools.

Legislators, prodded by determined charter school supporters, are expected to reconsider the bill. A virtually identical bill has been introduced in the state Senate.

Some state school board members, mindful of the political battle being waged at the Capitol, said they were disappointed by the findings in the report, prepared by the charter schools division of the state Department of Education.

"In this current political climate, I'd like to see some information that points out the benefits of charter schools," board member Linda Zechmann said. "I'm not seeing that here, and it's kind of disappointing."

Charter school backers in Georgia and across the country have argued that the schools are incubators of innovation that, if allowed to flourish, could succeed where some traditional schools fail.

The report said there are 162 charter schools in Georgia with a total of 98,263 students enrolled.

The findings in Wednesday's report didn't shock one charter school parent. Victoria Trestrail said she wasn't expecting nirvana when she placed her children in Atlanta Neighborhood Charter School.

She was looking for a place where her son and daughter would thrive and where her involvement would be expected rather than merely accepted.

"There's nowhere that's a utopia," said Trestrail, a 40-year-old stay-at-home mother. "Our [charter] schools face challenges just like other schools. I think the difference may be that we have more say, more involvement."

The report found that:

-- In 2010-11, 70 percent of charters met annual yearly progress targets established by the federal No Child Left Behind law while 73 percent of traditional schools in Georgia met those AYP targets that year.

-- Charters had an 82 percent graduation rate in 2010-2011; the state average that year was 80.9 percent. Some experts have questioned whether Georgia's graduation rates are inflated by the calculation method used.

Charter school supporters also have been having less success getting applications for new schools approved. In 2004, all 15 charter school applications were approved. By 2010, only 40 of the 80 applications were approved.

Louis Erste, director of the charter schools division at the state DOE, told board members many applications submitted have been of poor quality.

Simply approving charter schools for the sake of having charter schools is not the answer, Erste said.

"Charter schools are just a tool," he said. "They are not the goal. The goal is a high-quality education."

Mark Whitlock, chief executive officer of Central Educational Center, a college and career charter in Newnan, said would-be charter school operators face many of the same challenges faced by others trying to start a business.

"The reason so many of the applications for charter schools are considered poor quality, I suspect, is because they are reflective of the capacity of the communities from which they come," said Kamau Bobb, chairman of the board of the Wesley International Academy, a charter school in Atlanta.

"The parents and student advocates in the most depressed communities are those that recognize the need for alternative options for their children, but in many instances simply do not have the expertise or the professional networks necessary to put together high-quality, compelling applications," Bobb said.

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