

## **Virginia House and Senate Pass Charter School Expansion Bills**

*Legislation would allow more charter schools in underperforming school divisions*

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**Richmond**— Today the Virginia State Senate approved SB 1283 on a bipartisan vote of 21 to 19. The Virginia House of Delegates also approved their version of the charter school bill, HB 2342 by a vote of 55 to 42. Both bills would create regional public charter school divisions that could authorize public charter schools in areas of the state with struggling schools.

“Today’s votes are a big move forward for Virginia students and families, especially those trapped in chronically low-performing schools who are still waiting for better options,” said Senator Mark Obenshain, the patron of SB 1283. “Every student in Virginia deserves the chance to attend a high-quality school that meets their needs. I am confident that the House and Senate will work together quickly in the coming days to send a final bill to Governor McAuliffe for his signature.”

Virginia’s public charter school law, originally passed in 1998, has long been ranked one of the worst in the country (currently at 39 out of 43) according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Today, there are only nine public charter schools operating in the state.

“Despite their proven track record across the country, public charter schools have struggled to gain traction in Virginia due to a weak charter school law,” said Russ Simnick, senior director of state advocacy at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. “Today’s victories in the House and the Senate are an encouraging step forward in a multi-year effort to ensure that high-quality public charter schools are able to open and serve students who need them the most.”

A comprehensive 2013 national study of public charter schools by Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) showed positive learning gains for students in public charter schools compared with students in district-run public schools. The effect was particularly strong among minority students from low-income backgrounds, English Learners, and students with special needs.

According to the bills, the newly-created regional public charter school divisions would only be able to allow charter schools in school divisions with more than 3,000 students and where one or more school has had its accreditation denied for two of the last three years. Ninety-four Virginia schools have had their accreditation denied this year. More than half of those schools are located in just five school divisions: Henrico, Newport News, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Richmond City.

The new regional public charter school divisions will be governed by a board comprised of representatives of the community and local school divisions. The governing boards of the local school divisions will have at least one appointment to each regional board; and the majority of members of each regional board will reside in the affected divisions. This will ensure the regional public charter school divisions will have a strong local voice and that decisions meet local community needs.

Public charter schools authorized by the regional public charter school divisions will be funded by state and federal funding; they will not receive any funding from local school divisions. This means that these newly allowed charter schools will not impact existing school funding.

Previous attempts to create a statewide office that could authorize public charter schools were found unconstitutional. This new approach to authorizing charter schools is substantially different than previous proposals and addresses the constitutional concerns by maintaining local control.

In the coming days, the Senate bill is expected to be heard and considered by the House Education Committee.

For more information about the effort to expand the number of charter schools in Virginia, please visit <http://virginiacharterschools.org/> or follow us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/vacharterschools/> or on Twitter at @VACHarters.

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