

Virginia House and Senate Committees Pass Charter School Expansion Bills

Legislation would allow more charter schools in underperforming school divisions

Contact: Starlee Coleman (602) 758-9162

Richmond—This week the Virginia state Senate Education and Health Committee and Finance Committee passed SB 1283, a bill that would allow the Virginia Board of Education to create regional public charter school divisions that could authorize public charter schools in areas of the state with struggling schools. The House of Delegates Education Committee and the Appropriations Committee have also passed the House version of the bill, HB 2342.

These 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.

“Virginia’s public schools work quite well for many students. But there are thousands of students stuck in chronically low-performing school divisions. We can’t continue to let these students fall through the cracks,” said Senator Mark Obenshain, the patron of SB 1283. “Every child deserves a chance at the American Dream and it’s our responsibility to make sure they have access to schools that can set them on their way. If their existing schools aren’t doing the job, parents deserve options to give their child the best opportunity.”

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.

“Most states, and elected lawmakers of both parties—from President Obama to President Trump, have embraced public charter schools as good options for students assigned to struggling schools,” said Russ Simnick, senior director of state advocacy at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. “And the results are telling.”

A 2015 study showed that public charter school students in large cities gained the equivalent of 40 additional days of learning in math and 28 additional days in reading compared to their district-run public school peers. The study also found that the longer a student attends a public charter school, the greater the learning gains.

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.

Both charter school bills will go to their respective floors for approval by the full chamber in the coming days.

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

#