

The Times

Full funds for charter students

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Twelve years ago, the New Jersey Legislature approved a bill allowing the establishment of charter public schools. There was a lot of hand-wringing at the time, mainly by public school officials who worried that the charters would siphon off the better students, which would lead to a further decline of traditional public school education.

For the most part, that hasn't happened. The charter school movement has been a success -- no traditional public schools have gone out of business, although some charters have, and the variety of new techniques in educating young people, especially young people in the Abbott districts, is paying dividends.

There is one notable exception: Trenton. Charter schools in other poor urban cities are fulfilling the promise envisioned in the wording of the law passed in 1995: that they promote "comprehensive educational reform by providing a mechanism for the implementation of a variety of educational approaches which may not be available in the traditional public school classroom."

Longer school days, a longer school year, smaller classes and more individualized attention are some of the innovations that appear to be getting results in the state's 53 charter schools.

Clearly, something is being done right in Newark. According to a report by the New Jersey Charter Public Schools Association, the top three public schools there whose students took the 2006 eight-grade assessment tests (GEPA) were charter schools. And seven of the nine charters in that city scored above the district average. Further, North Star's eighth- and eleventh-graders are exceeding statewide averages. And if you're looking for further proof that North Star has its act together, you need only look at what happened to last year's graduating class: Every one of them enrolled in college.

In Camden, students at the Promise Charter School beat its district average by 40 points on the 2006 GEPA in both language arts and math. And in Asbury Park's Charter High School, 24 percent more students placed at or above the proficient level in language arts and 15 percent more in math than their counterparts at Asbury Park High School.

You might say that these remarkable achievements were made by the charters with one hand tied behind their backs. That's because the state's guidelines allow only 90 percent of the per-pupil state funding to accompany students who choose to attend charters. But in reality, that per-pupil expenditure in the Abbott districts is even lower. For some reason, extra Abbott money provided by the state isn't counted in the formula for the charters. So in reality, some charters are getting as low as 48 percent of per-student funding. In Trenton, for instance, the Village Charter School gets only 60.2 percent of the money the Trenton district gets to educate a student.

The Abbott per-pupil funding disparities are only part of the uphill fight that charter schools encounter. The cost of facilities is a cost borne strictly by the charters, adding to the squeeze they feel in trying to run innovative schools.

The Legislature needs to revisit the charter-school issue and correct some of the funding disparities. We see no reason why nothing less than 100 percent per-pupil funding should accompany each student who attends a charter school. After all, charters are public schools, too.