

Missouri lawmakers push charter school expansion

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — Missouri lawmakers are pushing to expand charter schools around the state — a move that advocates say would lead to innovation in the classroom, but that critics say may do little to improve student achievement.

Missouri law allows charters to operate independently of local districts only in Kansas City and St. Louis, where charters have received a mixed bag of performance scores. Bills working their way through the Missouri Legislature would expand that process to the rest of state, where charter schools currently must be tied to local school districts to open. No districts have opened a charter school.

"What we know about charters in the St. Louis area is that at least half of (charters) didn't do as well as our St. Louis public schools, which just became accredited again," said Democratic Sen. Jill Schupp of Creve Coeur. "So I'm not sure why we want to invest more public dollars in an alternative that doesn't work."

But charter operators and advocates say less oversight from traditional public school boards and the state gives school leaders the ability to innovate in the classroom. They also say it's unfair to compare public schools to charters because they have a different operating model.

Doug Thaman, executive director of the Missouri Charter Public School Association, said it would be more helpful to compare schools with peer schools to determine performance. He also said charter schools take in students who may be below grade level in achievement when they arrive.

"If (students are) starting below grade level, and many of them are, then they have much further to go to reach a point where they're testing at proficient and advanced level," Thaman said.

Charter schools are similar to traditional public schools because they are subsidized by state and local taxes based on student enrollment. The main differences rest in the oversight and application process.

Charter schools in the state's two largest cities must submit an application for approval with a sponsor — usually a university — and the sponsor then applies with the state Board of Education for a five-year contract. Critics say there's little accountability for such schools, which are monitored by sponsors and independently appointed boards instead of publicly elected boards and the state. While the state has the power to sanction traditional districts and schools, when it comes to charter schools, it only has the power to regulate the sponsor. It cannot force the sponsor to close a consistently low-performing school.

Sen. Bill Eigel, who sponsored one of the charter expansion proposals, said expanding school choice creates accountability through a free-market process.

"If these schools don't set a standard of performance that shows the parents that they can education their children, (the schools) won't be around very long," he said.

Missouri currently has 72 charter schools operating in Kansas City and St. Louis. Of the 35 schools with available data for the 2016 school year, 20 met less than 75 percent of state accountability standards. Six met less than 50 percent of standards.

A 2015 study from Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes found little difference in

annual learning gains in math and reading between students at traditional public schools and charter schools in St. Louis.

Nationwide, the numbers were more promising. The study found that the typical student in an urban charter school got the equivalent of 40 extra days of learning growth in math and 28 extra days of reading growth.

Brent Ghan, deputy executive director of the Missouri School Boards' Association, said expanding charters could potentially hurt rural districts with few students that already struggle for funding.

"If there's a greater draw on state funding by charter schools in the state, then there's less available funding in the formula for other schools," Ghan said.

Still others worry about unregulated charter expansion that would produce results similar to Michigan, the home state of U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, where a slack authorization process allowed rampant expansion and little accountability.

But Thaman said charters will be selective in where they open.

"We're not talking about trying to plant 1,000 flowers. We're looking at where there's a market and there's public support for it," Thaman said.