

Charter members

Ohio's new two-year budget slashes state aid to traditional public schools, while it authorizes more charter schools. Yet recent research and litigation make clear that state government continues to do a lousy job of regulating the charter schools that already operate in the Toledo area and across Ohio.

That doesn't add up. And it won't until elected officials are prepared to apply the same performance and accountability standards to charter schools that they demand of traditional ones, even at the risk of offending some campaign donors.

Gov. John Kasich and many state lawmakers, most of them Republicans, are strong advocates of charter schools. They say such schools can provide better education at less cost, because they are unshackled from many of the rules that govern traditional schools.

Advocates argue that charter schools also provide needed competition in education and enhanced student choice. Although most Ohio charter schools are operated by for-profit businesses, they are subsidized with taxpayer dollars.

Last year, Ohio's 330 charter schools enrolled 94,000 students and collected \$680 million in state tax support. Students who live in Toledo attend 44 charter schools, some of them online or outside the city -- a major factor in Toledo Public Schools' rapid enrollment decline and funding problems.

The new state budget lifts the previous ceiling on the number of charter schools, while ostensibly imposing tougher accountability measures. But lawmakers rejected meaningful standards in favor of weak ones.

A new study by Policy Matters Ohio, a nonpartisan research organization, notes that state education officials declared 45 percent of charter schools in "academic emergency" or on "academic watch" last year -- designations that indicate poor performance. Yet the group calculates that the supposedly tougher standards in the new budget apply mostly to smaller sponsors that oversee just 14 percent of charter schools.

Policy Matters Ohio notes that charter schools' growth in troubled urban districts such as Toledo remains "unchecked and unexamined." Allowing students in such districts to move from poor-performing public schools to poor-performing charters does them few favors.

At the same time, a judge in Franklin County ruled this month that White Hat Management of Akron, one of the state's largest private operators of charter schools, must give the governing boards of those schools more information about how it spends public money. That includes details about teacher pay, textbooks and equipment, school property, and lobbying expenses. Such data, the judge made clear, are public records.

White Hat's president, David Brennan, is a major contributor to Republican political campaigns in Ohio. Lawmakers rejected budget changes Mr. Brennan and other for-profit charter operators sought that would have weakened charter school oversight. But the new standards they did enact don't go nearly far enough.

Genuinely useful standards would include stronger scrutiny by the state Department of Education and local sponsors, to prevent poor-performing companies from setting up new charter schools. They would encourage public school districts and charter operators to work more closely together, instead of in zero-sum competition for students and the state tax dollars that follow them.

Some Ohio charter schools have fulfilled the academic promise that their supporters predicted. Too many have not. The ratio will improve when all schools, publicly or privately run, that accept public money are held equally accountable for how they spend it and the results they produce.