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Kansas needs more charter schools

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In a time when economic and community success depends on a well-educated population, Kansas should consider the potential of charter schools.

Charter schools are a variation of the public school model. Like traditional schools, they receive taxpayer money for students enrolled. But unlike traditional schools, they must meet explicit standards or close their doors.

In exchange for a charter with specific goals for student achievement, some of the traditional-school regulations are waived. Performance becomes more important than process. Charters must be renewed every so often (in Kansas, every three years). As a result, charter schools face a discipline not imposed on traditional public schools, which get their funding year after year (usually increased funding), regardless of how well they operate.

Have charter schools worked? According to a recent nationwide study, charter schools improved the performance of the average student by 3 percentile points on standardized tests. In a number of states, including Arizona and California, charter school students have outperformed their public school counterparts.

But the effectiveness of charter schools is limited if states impose heavy burdens on them. The Center for Education Reform, based in Washington, D.C., ranks charter laws on a scale of strong to weak ("A" to "F"), depending on how much procedural freedom the law allows. A "strong" charter law, for example, gives a group of teachers wishing to start a charter school the option of seeking the charter from universities or the state board of education rather than from the local school district.

By examining the results of tests required by the No Child Left Behind law, the center found that strong charter laws and academic performance go hand in hand. States with weak charter laws generally had low gains in student achievement; those with strong charter laws experienced higher gains.

The Kansas charter law is weak, earning a "D" from the center. Local districts must review any petition for a new charter, and they must approve any changes sought by the chartering school's management. There is an obvious conflict of interest at work: When a student leaves a traditional school for a charter school, so do tax dollars. As a result of the weak charter law, only 0.5 percent of Kansas students attended charter schools in fall 2003. This contrasts dramatically with 8 percent of students in Arizona, a state with an "A" rating.

In the effort to provide better education for students at a cost that does not handicap the economy, Kansas should evaluate the results that other states are getting with charter schools, and for that matter with education vouchers and tax credits. As other states introduce forms of competition to improve student performance and control costs, Kansas should do so as well.