

ALABAMA

The Crimson Tide has cast the state in a winning light over the years, but despite an impressive and cherished football history, this is one state that has rarely held the ball when it comes to charter school legislation.

Alabama had its first taste of school choice when the Children's Scholarship Fund launched in 1998, offering 375 scholarships for needy students. They received 9,000 applications, more than the entire district of Birmingham itself. The demand continues to outpace supply, an issue only a few legislators have tried to help solve.

A 2004 proposal for charters did not make it to the House floor, and another was later tabled because of union and school board association opposition. That is the extent to which charters have been passed down the line in Alabama, despite a dismal educational record that suggests much more can be done to help students.

On almost any objective standardized test, Alabama students score near the bottom. The state's high school graduation rate is only 60 percent, and only 42 percent of students participate in postsecondary education.

Any legislator should blanch at the fact that the reputable *Education Week* magazine, which is typically sympathetic to demographic and environmental factors that influence education, ranks Alabama 45th in terms of its citizens' chance for success. According to its 2007 Quality Counts, Alabama ranks 47th in student performance.

But Alabama is not without a role model. Although fierce competitors on the gridiron, Georgia and Alabama have some similarities – not just their southern charm but their academic challenges. To take on some of those challenges, Georgia enacted charter legislation in 1993, and while it put total control in the hands of school boards (with approval from the state), and the law is now under improvement, nearly 60 schools have opened since its inception. What's more, charter schools in Georgia are doing better than comparable, conventional public schools. Charters are serving higher numbers of free- and reduced-lunch students, and their racial makeup mirrors other schools. But 6 percent more charters met Adequate Yearly Progress goals under the No Child Left Behind Act. Reading and math scores were better as well.



Meanwhile, the funding structure of Georgia's charter schools makes them underfunded with approximately 30 percent fewer dollars - a model not to emulate. While this has not compromised educational quality, it's made it difficult to acquire buildings and grow the number of charter schools.

Like many states, Alabama is trying hard to grow its commerce. High-quality education systems often attract businesses. Over 80 percent of businesses polled recently by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce felt education was extremely important. Charter schools provide a unique avenue to address that combined need for commercial growth and academic excellence. Alabama has successfully attracted auto manufacturers to the state, but not a major auto company headquarters (like Nissan to Tennessee). The state has also recognized the benefit of public-private partnerships, like the Alabama Technology Network, which works to connect universities with businesses in need of organizational consulting and assistance. In Atlanta, Georgia, there is Tech High, a successful charter school ranked in the top ten of schools in the state, that is focused on preparing students for careers or for higher education that will answer the demands of a more technical and global economy. Tech High's students arrive behind, but quickly catch up, and graduate ahead.

Such an educational model could be employed in Alabama, but only with charter school legislation. It makes sense for business, for families and for the well-being of the state.

Charter schools are public schools that are open by choice, accountable for results, and free from most rules and regulations that typically bind other conventional public schools.

