

Improve Maryland's charter school laws

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Since their 1991 beginning in Minnesota, charter schools have increasingly become an option for parents seeking an alternative to traditional public education.

From 1999 through 2011, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, charter school enrollment exploded — 340,000 students enrolled in 1999; a little over a decade later, more than 2.5 million children attend 6,400 charter schools across the U.S. Thousands of students are on waiting lists to attend these schools. California, D.C., and Arizona have led the country in forming the most charters.

But in Maryland, more than a decade on from passage of the Public Charter School Act of 2003, this alternative path to education appears to be floundering thanks to regulations that have landed the state failing grades in two recent assessments.

As a story Friday from News-Post education reporter Rachel Karas detailed, the Washington-based Center for Education Reform evaluated charter school laws in 42 states and the District of Columbia on their construction and implementation, and whether or not they lead to creation of multiple quality learning opportunities for children. Of those surveyed, Maryland ranked 39th with a D grade. In January, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools named Maryland last out of 43 in its own ranking of charter school laws.

“With the length of the average charter school waiting list increasing to nearly 300 students, there absolutely needs to be a sense of urgency around creating strong charter school laws that will accelerate the pace of growth to meet demand,” said Kara Kerwin, president of the Center for Education Reform in a statement on the release of its report card, which awarded only five A grades. Nine were Bs, 18 were Cs, and 11, Ds and Fs.

Among the recommendations advocated for improving charter school laws are having a number of independent bodies that can approve charter school, rather than just Boards of Education, fewer limits on expansion, equitable funding and greater school autonomy.

Frederick County, which had the first charter school in the state, now has three — Carroll Creek and Monocacy Valley Montessori public charter schools (managed by Monocacy Montessori Communities Inc.) and Frederick Classical Charter School.

The state’s regulations are, according to Frederick Classical Charter School president Tom Neumark, “pretend charter school law. It's a charter school law in name only.”

Nowhere has the road to establishing a charter school been longer or rougher than in Frederick

County. It took four years for Classical Charter to win approval from the Board of Education, two years to establish the first, Montessori Valley. Yet, hundreds of residents are now applying for places through lotteries. In 2013, 965 applied for 98 openings at the two Montessori schools.

A 53-1 ratio seems like a pretty compelling message that some families in Frederick County want an alternative to traditional public school education.

That's not to say charter schools are a panacea for the U.S.'s ailing education system. They have their share of controversies. But charter schooling works, and works well in several states, according to the Center for Education Reform rankings. Maryland would do well to study those states for ways to improve its charter school laws. In one case, it wouldn't have to go far: Most highly ranked was neighboring D.C.