

The Chicago Sun-Times

"Houston, we'll have a problem -- if Illinois retreats on charter schools"

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Charter schools in Houston had a very big week. A \$65 million week, to be exact. That's how much was donated to the Knowledge is Power Program to open 42 new charter schools in Houston. KIPP is the largest charter school operator in the country, with one school in Chicago. Many of its schools are among the nation's very best. And now Houston is poised to expand KIPP's special brand of public schools fivefold.

Unfortunately, Illinois is poised to move in the opposite direction. Springfield is now considering legislation that would stymie charter growth in Chicago and throughout Illinois.

Capped at 30 by state law, there are a limited number of charters the Chicago Public Schools can grant. By "replicating campuses," however, CPS has expanded the operations of several of its current charter schools without issuing a separate charter for every new campus. This has allowed CPS to remain under the charter cap while also allowing some of the city's best schools -- such as Chicago International and Noble Street charter schools -- to serve more students in more communities.

Lawmakers are seeking to end that practice. State Rep. Monique Davis has proposed that no charter school in Illinois be allowed to expand its campuses beyond their current number. Since CPS has used 29 of its 30 charters, the legislation would effectively kill charter growth in Chicago.

Chicago has already made plans to open 10 new charter campuses in the next two years. If Davis' legislation becomes law, at least nine of those campuses will never open. Thousands of students will have to change their fall plans, and millions of dollars will have been wasted on capital development.

Davis' bill not only serves to undermine parents' confidence in the stability of charter schools, it also undermines the confidence of philanthropists who would invest in those charter schools.

You see, Houston is not unique. In Illinois, the business community and private foundations have rallied around Chicago schools as well. In the last 10 years, private donors have given generously, including \$62 million to the very schools this bill will keep from opening. Inexplicably, some think we can scoff at these investments and the positive returns that they will yield for public education.

This bill comes at a time when research from the National Research Development Center on School Choice tells us that the value added by Chicago's charter schools to student performance far exceeds that added by traditional public schools.

Conducted by Harvard research analyst Francis Shen and Brown Professor Kenneth Wong, the forthcoming study takes into account students' socioeconomic status -- thus comparing apples to apples. The study tells us that while charter schools initially perform much the same as traditional schools, they improve over time. Using test scores at comparable public schools as the norm, Chicago charter schools in at least their fifth year of operation "overperform" 78 percent of the time on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test.

This is exactly what charter proponents predicted long ago, before the state had opened a single charter school. Parental choice provides the necessary incentives for schools to improve. So, whereas charter schools open with knowledge no greater than that possessed by the public schools, they are able to quickly and effectively adapt to new knowledge and to the needs of their own parents and students.

Now, Chicago charter schools that have been open the longest and posted the strongest gains -- such as the Chicago International Charter School -- have been asked by CPS to open more schools this fall. However, if CPS is barred from replicating campuses, that won't happen. We'll be forced to live with the failing status quo.

At least we'll have Houston to remind us of what could have been.