

## With bipartisan support, charter schools are on the march

Written by Ben Velderman

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WASHINGTON D.C. -- There's no question that 2011 has been good for charter schools.

And if lawmakers in Michigan, New Jersey, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania can get pro-charter school

The reason for the banner year? President Barack Obama's "Race to the Top" education reform initiative

That's according to Todd Ziebarth, the vice president of state advocacy and support for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

In an interview with Education Action Group, Ziebarth said that a number of cash-strapped states implemented policies favorable to charter schools, in hopes of winning "Race to the Top" education reform dollars.

Those commitments to charter schools were acted upon when a record number of reform-minded, Tea Party-friendly candidates were voted into state offices nearly a year ago. Since then, 16 states have passed nearly 30 laws to either expand or preserve the role of charter schools.

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“This year, we made pretty good progress in a number of states,” Ziebarth said. “Hopefully, there will be more good news in the weeks and months ahead.”

Ziebarth believes the year’s biggest charter school victory occurred in Maine, which became the 41st state to allow the creation of charter schools.

North Carolina families won big when lawmakers repealed the cap that limited the number of charter schools allowed in the state.

Illinois passed a law that allows a state-appointed commission to authorize charter schools, instead of leaving that decision to self-interested school districts.

Expanding access to charter schools was part of Indiana's historic education overhaul.

But not all the charter school victories were glamorous and headline-grabbing, as Ziebarth points out.

For instance, Indiana, Wisconsin and Ohio all passed laws allowing charter schools to use a school district’s surplus buildings, a move that allows charters to spend their resources on students instead of rent.

Teachers unions in several cities, including Boston and Toledo, have recently fought efforts to allow charters to use vacant public school buildings. Those were obvious attempts to stymie the competition.

“Shrinking state budgets makes funding charter schools a challenge,” Ziebarth said. “Having access to public buildings really helps. And it makes sense because taxpayers have already paid for these buildings, many of which have been designated for educational purposes.”

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In New Mexico, charter advocates played good defense and staved off an attempt to impose a moratorium on charters.

Looking ahead, Ziebarth is “optimistic that we can finally break through in Alabama next year.” He also expects charter schools will be allowed to expand in Missouri, and may be allowed to form in Montana – though that will have to wait until the state legislature reconvenes in 2013.

Ziebarth acknowledged that charters have “made pretty good progress in a number of states,” but have suffered a few disappointments, too.

Several politically conservative states such as Texas, Idaho, Alabama and Mississippi failed to pass charter school measures in 2011. While Republicans run the show in those states, and typically favor school choice and charter schools, Ziebarth thinks there is a misperception among some that charters only benefit urban areas, and not rural and suburban communities.

Teacher unions also present a problem for charter schools. Ziebarth said the unions employ a three-pronged approach to stopping the spread of charter schools: legislation, litigation and organization.

If charter laws survive the legislative and legal hurdles, unions will often try to organize the charter school teachers. If the union succeeds in forcing charter schools to collectively bargain with employees, the schools lose their flexibility and innovation, and become virtually indistinguishable from their traditional public school counterparts.

Without a doubt, teacher unions will try to roll back the gains charter school supporters have made over the past year, Ziebarth said.

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“Teacher unions are still fighting hard in statehouses across the country,” he said.

The unions will continue to fight their charter school competitors, likely because charters have become so popular with families all across the country. Educationnews.org reports that "six school districts now have more than 30 percent of their public school students enrolled in public charter schools: New Orleans, Washington D.C., Detroit, Kansas City (Missouri), Flint, MI and Gary, IN."

The site also reports that the Los Angeles district has 79,385 students enrolled in charter schools, the highest number in the nation.

Ziebarth believes the best way to inoculate charter schools from the volatility of politics is to make the movement as bipartisan as possible.

“But that’s easier said than done,” he said.

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