

# Proposal would allow more charter schools to open

STAFF PHOTO BY KEN BLEVINS

Kindergarten teacher Megan Britt works with her Manatee group at Roger Bacon Academy in Brunswick County. Student's scores at the charter school are consistently higher than neighboring areas due to teaching tactics like direct instruction.

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Of all kindergarten-through-eighth-grade schools in the state, Leland's Charter Day School ranked among the top 25 in academic growth in 2005.

Thinking it would get phone calls from the state and other schools wanting to find out what it did right, the charter school – which uses the highly structured Direct Instruction method – prepared materials to share. But no one called, said its founder, Baker Mitchell.

"It's sad to think that there are kids out there who could be helped by these methods, but no one's interested," said Mitchell, whose Roger Bacon Academy also runs Columbus Charter School.

Last week, the state denied Mitchell's application to open a third charter school, in Duplin County, criticizing the part of his school's pledge that stresses obedience, he said.

Mitchell said he feels the state is not really looking at the good things his school is doing, and he doesn't know whether regular public schools are learning anything from the charter school.

Indeed, the state doesn't keep track of innovations at charter schools and how they influence the public school system, said Jean Kruff, a consultant with the N.C. Office of Charter Schools.

But innovation is one of the reasons charter schools came into existence, and the perceived lack of them is one of the reasons some say North Carolina shouldn't open the door for more charter schools to start.

## Lift the cap?

N.C. school board Chairman Bill Harrison said he doesn't see much difference between what charter schools and regular public schools are doing. He said he thinks the state should keep the number of charter schools limited to 100 until it determines whether they're accomplishing what they're supposed to.

A General Assembly bill proposes raising the cap on charter schools from 100 to 106, which Harrison and the N.C. School Boards Association are against, especially when big education budget cuts are looming in the state. The bill passed the House in a 102-6 vote and is now in the Senate.

Funded publicly but run privately, charter schools can pick their own curricula and have more freedom with their spending than regular public schools. That flexibility should allow them to come up with innovations, Harrison said.

But state and federal charter school experts say it would be difficult to track innovations.

"Public schools might say, 'That was our idea,'" said Kruff, whose office monitors the finances, governance

and student achievement of North Carolina charter schools.

### **Mission accomplished?**

Ratified in 1996, the N.C. Charter Schools Act lists six purposes for the existence of charter schools:

- Improving learning.
- Encouraging the use of innovative teaching methods.
- Being accountable based on individual performance.
- Increasing opportunities for students at both ends of the academic spectrum – gifted or at risk of failing.
- Creating new professional opportunities for teachers.
- Giving students and parents a choice besides the public school system.

A 2008 report from the state school board's Blue Ribbon Commission on Charter Schools found that the model has fulfilled the last three, and recognizes that charter schools' academic performances vary greatly. It recommends that the state be stricter in closing poor-performing charter schools, while allowing those excelling to grow.

It also recommends raising the cap by six schools per year.

The assessment differs in a report the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research released just the year before. The 2007 report concludes charter schools should work on their weaknesses before the state allows more to open.

A news release on the report says that in the 2005-06 school year, fewer than half the state's charter schools had more than 70 percent of students score at or above grade level in state tests. The study also "found little evidence that charter school innovations have been adopted by traditional public schools. Thus, the notion that charter schools serve as a testing ground for educational innovations that eventually move into the public schools is unfounded."

A federal official with 'innovation' in his department's title can't refute that.

"How do you keep track of innovation?" asked Dean Kern, of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of

Innovation and Improvement. "It could be anything from a teacher's methodology in introducing a new math lesson to a whole school design."

States are supposed to report the progress of their charter school systems to the federal government, Kern said. But he agrees with Krufft that innovations are hard to pin down.

Kern insists, however, that charter schools have done well nationally, and President Barack Obama, a big supporter of the program, is proposing injecting about \$50 million more into it, for a total of \$268 million in grants.

### **Providing a choice**

Harrison and the N.C. School Boards Association say charter schools siphon funds away from public schools.

But Krufft argues it's cheaper to educate children at charter schools, since these schools, which receive county and state funds based on enrollment, must rely on donations and money out of their own pockets to build facilities.

Krufft and Mitchell said they think the cap on charter schools should be lifted because more and more people want to send their children to them and have to be put on waiting lists. While charter schools can't turn any student away, they have to draw names in a lottery when they don't have space for everyone.

"I don't think a parent should gamble a child's future on whether or not they win the lottery," Mitchell said.

Increasing the number of charter schools is important because they offer parents a choice in education, Mitchell and Krufft said.

The state would still have some control over them.

Unlike regular public schools, the state can close charter schools that are doing badly. So far, 44 of the state's charter schools have either lost or given up their charters, Krufft said.

Most of those had to be closed because weak leadership and instruction drove students away and they could no longer support themselves, and a few because of financial wrongdoing such as embezzlement, Krufft said.

North Carolina currently has 97 charter schools, including three in our area, out of the country's 4,600.