

Kadner: Parents battle for slice of school pie

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Students are dismissed from Southland College Prep High School Friday, Aug. 19, 2011, in Richton Park, Ill. | File photo

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A terrific charter high school for children in the south suburbs is creating a financial dilemma. People are always looking for ways to improve public education and cut costs. But the magic bullet simply does not exist.

Some parents in Rich Township High School District 227 were dissatisfied with their three academically underperforming high schools (Rich East, Rich Central and Rich South).

They asked the school board for permission to open a charter school and were refused.

So the parents took their case to the state board of education and received permission to open in August 2010.

Southland College Prep Charter High School in Richton Park serves students from Country Club Hills, Flossmoor, Hazel Crest, Homewood, Matteson, Olympia Fields, Park Forest, Richton Park and Tinley Park. It's a success story.

However, its enrollment is limited to 125 students each year. And most of its funding comes from the District 227 budget.

That means about 50 percent of the district's general state aid, \$5.3 million, is being spent on the 375 students at Southland College Prep. That's compared with \$5.1 million for the more than 3,900 students at District 227's three high schools.

Next school year, as Southland Prep reaches its maximum enrollment of 500, about 80 percent of the district's general state aid, \$7.9 million, will go to the charter school.

District 227's total budget is about \$65 million, with the majority of the money coming from the property tax.

But with state education funding being cut and costs going up, any additional loss of state aid causes a crisis.

As a result, state Reps. Will Davis (D-Hazel Crest) and Anthony DeLuca (D-Chicago Heights) have proposed legislation that would force the state board of education to separately fund any charter school it approves without a local school district's consent.

The state board opposes House Bill 2660 because it doesn't have any extra money to finance charter schools.

Gov. Pat Quinn has threatened to cut the state education budget by about \$400 million next year. There have been \$861 million in cuts since fiscal year 2009 in general state aid, early childhood

learning, bilingual education and school transportation, according to a spokeswoman for the state school board.

Southland Prep parents are in an uproar because if the proposed legislation passes, the school's funding would be deeply cut. Parents called an emergency meeting for Thursday night to discuss the situation.

There's only one other charter school in the state operating without the school district's approval — Prairie Crossing Charter High School in Grayslake, which is eating up about 80 percent of the general state aid for the two school districts it serves.

A third charter high school, operated by Concepts Schools, has been approved by the state for Chicago without the blessing of Chicago Public Schools but has not opened.

On Thursday morning, Davis told me he will not pursue approval of HB 2660 this spring due to the outpouring of opposition.

"I have nothing against charter schools, and Southland Prep is doing a great job," Davis explained.

"The problem is that when the state authorizes a charter school without the approval of the local school district, it's the local district that has to finance it and not the state.

"The governor has now created a separate Charter Schools Commission that can authorize charter schools without the state board of education's input.

"There are a number of charter school applications pending, and we expect the number of charters to increase. We're going to be taking more and more money away from local school districts to fund these schools, even as the state continues to cut public education funding.

"Personally, I want the Legislature to look at new ways of generating revenue for public education, but I'm alone down here (in Springfield). No one else is talking about trying to find new revenue streams for education."

Most charter schools in Illinois operate with the blessings of their school districts. They are usually financed by closing a school or schools, thereby saving money.

And there's pressure from public education critics to increase the number of charter schools to give parents and their children greater choice.

Many of those same groups oppose more money for public education and, in fact, want to cut public school spending.

The charter school movement, to a great degree, is an outgrowth of a voucher movement advocated by public education critics. When the voucher movement failed to gain momentum, the focus switched to charter schools and found new advocates among a growing number of parents fed up with traditional public schools that they believe had failed their children.

But the issue of adequate funding has never been addressed. As a result, Southland Charter Prep and District 227 aggressively pursue grants from outside sources to pay for the education of public schoolchildren.

DeLuca, like Davis, said he supports Southland Prep but understands the serious financial problems confronting District 227 as it struggles to educate the vast majority of students in its communities with ever-shrinking resources.

“I’ve met with both sides and heard their concerns and am trying to work out a solution that helps both of them,” DeLuca said. “If the state authorizes a charter school, the funding should come from its financial resources and not out of the local school district. I believe the state has the obligation to fund Southland Prep.”

In a statement in opposition to the bill, the Illinois State Board of Education said HB 2660, rather than solving the problem, would provide an incentive for local school boards to deny charter applications to shift the burden of funding to the state.

The real answer here is to adequately fund public education. But there’s no support for that