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An update on the charter school assault

Lawmakers still bent on stifling innovation

It took a fight to create Southland College Prep Charter High School.

In 2010, the Richton Park charter school opened its doors as an alternative to Rich Township High School District 227. School district officials rejected the charter's application to open, then sought to crush the charter's legal appeals. The case went to the Illinois Appellate Court before District 227 leaders gave up.

From the start, the concept of Southland College Prep divided communities, triggered an ugly public relations battle and tested the reputations of two warring school superintendents.

The charter school opened only because the Illinois State Board of Education saw a good opportunity and approved its application after it had been denied by District 227. Next month, Southland Prep will graduate its first senior class, and 80 percent of those students have been accepted at a college or university.

Keep that in mind as you hear more angry talk in Springfield about the need to halt the menace of charter schools.

We wrote nearly a month ago about the legislative assault on charter schools. Several bills seek to put up roadblocks for charter schools. They would make it more difficult for schools like Southland Prep to open, more difficult for them to operate independently and to prosper.

Yes, there's a faction in Springfield bent on crushing the charter school movement here, even as that movement flourishes in other states. The anti-charter faction is having some success.

The House has passed a bill that would dissolve the Illinois State Charter School Commission, the independent panel created not long ago to hear appeals when a local school board rejects a charter school.

A bill that advanced out of a House committee would limit the ability of charter schools to market themselves. Currently, charter schools advertise, distribute pamphlets door-to-door and do whatever they can to attract students. Under the legislation, charters could use only private money for such activities.

Other bills kicking around Springfield seek to restrict how charter schools can spend their money, hire staff and conduct admissions. Under these bills, state government would clamp down on the independence and flexibility that's at the very heart of charter schools.

School choice is going to be a key issue in the race for governor. Gov. Pat Quinn signed the legislation that created the charter school appeal commission, but he also signed legislation that put a one-year freeze on creating virtual charter schools. Quinn reassured the Illinois Education Association on Friday that he won't "charterize" the public school system. Republican challenger Bruce Rauner has been a strong financial supporter of charter schools.

That might explain part of the rush by some lawmakers to get charter restrictions to the governor's desk before the election.

But we have to get beyond the idea that charter schools are the enemy of public schools. First, they *are* public schools. And they provide students an opportunity, like Southland College Prep does. The school serves mostly African-American, middle-income families. Enrollment is restricted to 500 students, all of whom are selected based on a random lottery that is held in public, in front of the parents who want to send their kids there.

Daniel Evans, of Richton Park, was one of those parents. Concerned that the local high school wasn't preparing kids for college, he and his wife were exploring their options for their two sons, now 15 and 16, when Southland College Prep was ready to open.

"Private school would have put a significant strain on me. And I struggled with doing that because I firmly believe a quality education should be free," he told us.

"My prayers were answered when we learned a school was opening in our backyard." He and his wife sat nervously through the lottery, hoping their son's name would be called. It was.

"We jumped for joy," Evans said.

His two boys, a sophomore and a junior, are now beneficiaries of a rigorous education that includes constant focus on college — and helping families find the resources to pay for it. Students are in class from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. five days per week.

Yet some lawmakers want to restrain schools such as Southland College Prep. They want to limit choice, limit innovation.

The next few weeks are critical for the future of charter school students and parents in Illinois. Lawmakers, stand with them.