

H.R. 2904 propels charter schools -- September 2007

In 1995, Delaware enacted charter school legislation, increasing the number of public school choices available to parents and students. Last year alone, 6% of the state's public school students were enrolled in charter schools. These 7,500 students are enrolled in some of the most innovative and effective public schools in the state.

Delaware's experience with charter schools is not unique. Currently, 40 states and the District of Columbia have charter schools, educating over 1.14 million American children. The charter school movement has blossomed from 1 school in 1992 to over 4,000 schools in 2007.

Despite this amazing growth, parental demand for charter schools is nowhere near being met. In Delaware, over 3,000 students are on charter school waiting lists, roughly half the current charter student population. This type of demand is not the exception, but the norm. In fact, over 300,000 children are on charter school waiting lists across America. While resources have remained level over the last several years, the federal charter schools programs have produced impressive results.

Continued federal support of charter schools is needed now as much as ever. Fifteen years into the movement, charter schools are still forced to operate with less money than traditional public schools. According to a recent study, charter schools, on average, receive 78% of the funds that flow to traditional public schools, often because charter schools do not receive funds to cover facilities costs. Like many states, Delaware continues to struggle with this dilemma. Just last week, the Delaware Military Academy (DMA) was prohibited from accessing a state conduit bond. This kind of financing doesn't use state money; instead it allows nonprofits and educational institutions to take advantage of the state's low interest rates to finance capital projects. Unfortunately, the state ruled against the DMA based on previous policy decisions prohibiting charter schools from accessing facilities funding. While states across the country struggle with policy decisions like this one, the Federal government has stepped in to fill the funding void charters face.

Due to these troubling gaps, the Federal government has created three programs which provide invaluable financial assistance to states and their charter schools: the Charter Schools Program (CSP), the State Facilities Incentive Grants Program, and the Credit Enhancement for Charter Schools Facilities Program. Since the mid 1990s, Delaware alone has received over \$10 million dollars in federal money for charter schools.

These three programs serve different but equally vital purposes. The Charter Schools Program provides start-ups funds to charter schools. The State Facilities Incentive

Grant Program provides matching funds to states that secure per pupil facilities support for charter school students. The Credit Enhancement for Charter School Facilities Program provides money to public and nonprofit entities that enhance the ability of charter schools to raise private capital to acquire, construct, renovate, or lease facilities. For every federal dollar appropriated to this program, grantees have been able to leverage over five dollars in private money.

With the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act pending this year, Congress has the opportunity to enhance these programs, by implementing the improvements put forth in H.R. 2904 the Charter School Enhancement Act of 2007, a bipartisan bill introduced by Mr. Boustany, which I support. These improvements will help promising start-up charter schools and replicate proven charter models. If the next phase of the charter movement is to be as successful as the last 15 years, Congress must strengthen these programs and boost its financial support for them. By doing so, it will increase the number of high-quality public charter schools where they are most needed - schools that will foster radically higher academic achievement for children who are still, today, left behind.