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Editorial

Chortling over charters

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Chicago's charter schools are an impressive lot. Charters often do a better job educating the most challenging students in the poorest neighborhoods and getting them into college than regular neighborhood schools do. Around the country, states and cities look to Chicago's rigorous system of authorizing and monitoring charters as a model to emulate.

That record begs the question: What's with our own state's hostility toward charters?

Hostility? Follow the money. As the number of students in Illinois charter schools soars--thanks mainly to Mayor Richard Daley's Renaissance 2010 plan to build 100 new schools, many of which are charters--the amount of state money available to help start them shrivels like a raisin.

By law, Illinois is supposed to have three separate funds to help with planning and start-up costs for new charter schools. It once had all three. Today, only two exist.

In one loan fund, the state appropriation dropped from \$2 million in 2002 to \$20,000 today. In a separate grant fund, the state's appropriation of \$11 million in 2002 is \$3.4 million now. A third fund, which had \$2 million in federal grant money a few years ago, shows zero today.

"It's not a huge amount of money, but it's a significant amount of money at a time when every penny counts in the ramp-up stage," said Elizabeth Evans, executive director of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools.

Illinois has lost out on federal money in recent years, for no good reason. Consider:

Officials at the Illinois State Board of Education claim the feds reprioritized their money toward hurricane-stricken states.

Told of this claim, Dean Kern laughed uproariously. Kern heads up the U.S. Department of Education's charter schools program.

Illinois' two most recent applications were rejected as inexplicably weak. The first of those was denied long before Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, Kern said.

Why was it denied? "Illinois' state application ranked low [in quality] as scored by an external panel of reviewers," Kern said. Plenty of states outside Katrina's path won the three-year grants supporting charter expansion.

"There's nothing holding [Illinois] from submitting an application that's of high quality and as competitive as the other 40 chartering states," Kern said after state officials then changed their story and said the denial resulted because of various restrictions Illinois places on charters.

Translation: This should be easy money for Illinois. Kern called Chicago's Renaissance 2010 plan "a great strategy" to cite in its application, and he expressed surprise that state officials didn't do so more emphatically.

OK, if Katrina is innocent, what's constraining support in Illinois for charter schools?

The state board says the administration of Gov. Rod Blagojevich essentially has diverted money from the charter funds to help the neediest conventional schools in Illinois. That might be a convincing rationale if charters served kids from well-to-do families. In fact, the overwhelming majority of students in Illinois charters come from disadvantaged homes; they primarily differ from students in conventional schools in the higher quality of education they receive.

Charter advocates wonder if the real reason they're being shortchanged is political pressure from teachers' unions, which don't like the competition their members face from charter schools and their generally non-union faculties.

Whatever the reason, the lack of support is troubling at a time when Illinois is grappling for better strategies to educate young people. Some of the most innovative ideas in education today are coming from charter schools.

More than 90 percent of students at Noble Street Charter School are minority and 86 percent are poor. Remarkably, between 80 and 90 percent not only graduate, but also go on to college.

In four years, Alain Locke Charter Academy in East Garfield Park saw its standardized test scores skyrocket. While only 13.6 percent of students passed state exams in the 2001-2002 school year, 72.1 percent passed in 2004-2005. So astronomical were the gains that auditors came in to verify the results. In subsequent tests, the students did even better.

Nearly all of Illinois' charter schools are public schools located in the state's most challenging areas. Just like regular neighborhood public schools, charters must take in any child who applies, provided there's space. Charters operate free of many public school regulations; they also are far more likely to lose their charters and be shut down in a hurry if they're not working. With 10,000 kids on waiting lists to get into Chicago's charter schools, somebody must think they're working.

"With the record that the charters in Illinois have, it's just a shame that the state isn't paying more attention," said Nelson Smith, president of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Illinois will have a chance to address its confounding indifference to charters shortly after the new year. That's when the next application for federal grant money will be due.

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