

## Charter-school crackdown advances in Tallahassee

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TALLAHASSEE — Prompted by reports of nepotism and lax financial controls, the Florida Senate unanimously passed a plan Friday to make Florida's more than 360 charter schools more accountable in their classrooms and on their financial statements.

Charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately operated, would no longer be able to hire and do business with relatives, and they would be forced to communicate students' academic performance even when the state does not give the schools a letter grade. The bill (SB 278) would also authorize school districts and other charter sponsors to terminate a school's contract if its administrators do not correct financial deficiencies.

The measure now heads to the House, where similar legislation failed last year after unanimously passing the Senate. Proponents say this year's version stands a better chance of passing, with support from the charter-school industry and a coalition of House members.

For two years, Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Fort Lauderdale, has championed the accountability measures. A former school superintendent and board member, Gaetz cited a series of charter-school stories published in the *Orlando Sentinel* in 2007 as being the impetus behind the legislation.

"I support the charter-school movement for the competition, choice and innovation it can provide," Gaetz said during an interview Friday. "As your series and the follow-up stories you have written show, the kind of loose oversight the state has applied has allowed some bad actors to do bad things and has allowed sloppy actors to do sloppy things that have negatively affected children and their education."

The series of articles found a disproportionate number of charter operations were among the worst-performing schools in the state. More than half of all charters reported operating at a loss, and nearly half had financial arrangements with insiders that would not be allowed in regular schools. Some of the schools performed dismally year after year without raising any alarm or any push for change. The state's controls were so few that a Pensacola-area charter rented out its teens for road work for five years.

## Charter schools in favor

Charter-school operators seem generally supportive of the latest measure. Lynn Norman-Teck, a spokeswoman for the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools, said the bill would assist the schools in their efforts to provide higher-quality educational options and reinforce existing accountability requirements.

"We continue to support public charter schools that do great work for the right reasons, and believe this legislation will provide more guidance to achieve just that," she said.

Cut from the original bill was a requirement that charters comply with constitutional limits on class sizes. And senators added provisions that would allow the hybrid public/private campuses to apply for grants under the federal economic-stimulus package.

Gaetz said this year's appropriations bills call for charters to operate under the same class-size rules as regular campuses.

## 'Baby steps,' critic says

A lobbyist for the state's biggest teachers union wasn't thrilled with the Senate's final product.

"It's baby steps," Florida Education Association lawyer Ron Meyer said. "We would like to have seen more."

The Senate-approved accountability measure now heads to the House as HB 1005, where it has the support of a coalition of representatives, including Bryan Nelson, R- Apopka; John Legg, R-Port Richey; Anitere Flores, R-Miami; and Seth McKeel, R-Lakeland. Nelson said he is working with senators and local school districts to further refine the bill.

"At this time, we are working on strengthening the provisions of this language in order to ensure that we have the strong safeguards necessary to ensure accountability of our charter schools," Nelson said Friday in a written statement, "while promoting our mission to guarantee that our children have access to the best education possible."