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EDITORIALS

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Charter School Expansion A Welcome Texas Decision

Texas Education Agency Commissioner Robert Scott took a bold step last week when he announced he would make it easier for high-performing charter schools in Texas to expand.

His decision will help Texas students, Texas families, and ultimately, the Texas economy.



The state has capped the number of charter schools it will allow at 215, and we're at that cap. A bipartisan bill to lift the cap died in the most recent legislative session on a point of order.

But the state education agency isn't without options. Scott can unilaterally approve additional campuses for existing charter schools that are already showing success. And it's a good move, particularly right now.

"News about the charter expansions comes as the federal government is to announce eligibility rules for stimulus money under a newly established \$4 billion innovation initiative called Race to the Top," the Austin American-Statesman reported. "Education Secretary Arne Duncan said he will look more favorably on states without caps on charter school numbers."

Scott is already meeting with some resistance from teacher unions, but he shouldn't let that dissuade him.

That's because charter schools are an effective addition to the Texas public school system, plagued by an unacceptable dropout rate and underperforming schools in many areas.

"A student drops out of an American high school every 26 seconds, according to America's Promise Alliance," points out Brooke Dollins Terry of the Texas Public Policy Foundation. "In Texas, researchers at the Intercultural Development Research Association find that one of every three school students fails to graduate. Last year, 185 Texas high schools were labeled 'dropout factories' by Johns Hopkins University researchers."

But charter schools are a viable alternative to those, she says. And they're in a unique position to serve minorities.

"Last year, 80 percent of Texas students in charter schools were minorities, compared to 60 percent in traditional public schools," Terry says. "To best meet the individual needs of their students, there is a range of charter school models. Some charter schools, to help their students catch up, offer a longer school day, Saturday classes, and mandatory summer school."

And charter schools are helping those students to succeed.

"After three years at a Texas charter school, students go from being academically behind to outscoring their peers at traditional public schools in reading, writing, and arithmetic, according to the Texas Center for Educational Research," she reports.

But there aren't enough of them. Last year, nearly 17,000 Texas students were on a waiting list to attend a charter school.

Scott's decision could help. And we will all benefit through a better-educated workforce, Texas Association of Business President Bill Hammond says.

"Charter schools in Texas are an indispensable complement to our public education system, and Commissioner Scott's decision to help underserved communities by removing the bureaucratic shackles of the charter school application process on these already-effective schools deserves recognition," Hammond says.

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