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EDITORIALS

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State Learning Lessons On Dropout Prevention

You can't teach to an empty desk.

That's why Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst is right to ask the Senate Education Committee to focus on dropout prevention and other educational reforms in anticipation of the 2011 legislative session.



And an important reform that could go far in helping reduce the number of dropouts in Texas is increasing the number of charter schools, a new study says.

"While almost 130,000 students benefit from attending a public charter school in Texas, 40,000 more are prevented from attending due to space constraints," says Brooke Dollens Terry of the Texas Public Policy Foundation. "Clearly, demand is increasing for public charter

schools, but supply is not."

Yet charter schools — public schools with more freedom to innovate — are in a unique position to affect the dropout rate, particularly among minority students.

"Charter schools serve a higher proportion of poor and minority students than traditional public schools in Texas," Ms. Terry explains. "In the 2008-09 school year, charter school students were 83 percent minority and 70 percent low-income compared to traditional public schools with 65 percent minority and 55 percent low-income."

And because charter schools are able to try new approaches, they can better tailor the teaching to the students' needs.

"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," Ms. Terry reports.

Yet there aren't enough charter school slots to go around.

"Unfortunately, Texas has a cap limiting the number of open-enrollment charter operators to 215," she adds. "This number was put in place in 2001 so that the Texas Education Agency could refine its application review and oversight processes to weed out bad charter schools."

And the state has done a good job in shutting down ineffective and inefficient charter schools. But the oversight is now in place and the cap is no longer needed.

"We applaud the recent decision by Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott to allow successful charter schools to expand more quickly, but the long-term solution to the problem is for the Texas Legislature to eliminate the arbitrary and unnecessary cap on charter schools and remove barriers to the replication of successful schools," Ms. Terry adds.

That's just one of the educational reforms Dewhurst has called on the Senate Education Committee to study. He also wants the committee to look into the middle grades ways to prepare middle school students for success; the state's accountability system (including how the dropout rates are calculated), and cost efficiencies within the educational system.

But allowing more charter schools is an easy call.

"There is strong demand in Texas for more education options as evidenced by more than 40,000 students on a waiting list to attend a charter school," Ms. Terry says. "Texas policymakers need to put the best interest of students first by opening the schoolhouse door to students waiting in line."

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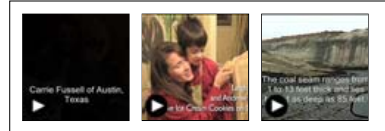
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