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Community is ready for the right charter schools

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Posted Apr 15, 2008 @ 06:25 PM

California opens 100 charter schools a year. Here in Illinois, only 60 charter schools are allowed — period — and lawmakers are fighting to lift the maximum to 100.

We think Illinois' go-slow approach has had some merit. But it's time to expand charter schools for the sake of the students our current system is failing.

Many of those students are, sadly, right here in Rockford.

Eleven advocates for local charter schools spoke with the Editorial Board on Monday.

Adam Smith, the mayor's director of education and lifelong learning, said he senses the community is more open than ever to the concept of charter schools. We sense he's right.

A public forum was held Tuesday night at Rockford College. As envisioned locally, charters would serve the Rockford School District's most at-risk students. The need is clear, with dropout and truancy rates much higher than the state average.

Charters may not be a perfect solution, but what we are doing now is not working.

In 2001, the School District began its fight against a charter school plan that officials said would be a financial drain on the district. The legal battle made it to the Illinois Supreme Court, which ruled in the School District's favor in 2005.

Charter schools receive a percentage of state per-pupil spending and supplement the costs of operation with corporate and private support. Looking at charters as a siphon on finances, however, is shortsighted in the extreme: If at-risk kids drop out — or are chronically truant — the district loses the money anyway.

Winnebago County Board Chairman Scott Christiansen offered a reality check when he said that taxpayers already are supporting a very expensive charter school — the county jail. Christiansen said the jail just granted its 100th GED, or high school equivalency diploma.

The Rockford School Board is beginning to come around. Late last year board members approved a timeline and process by which the district would consider charter school proposals. In Rockford, the School Board has authority over approving a charter, although in cities like Indianapolis, charter schools can be governed by either the mayor, the school district or Ball State University.

According to Elizabeth Evans, executive director of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools, better oversight and screening criteria lead to better outcomes for the charter school.

That's a lesson for local charter school advocates. Expand, but don't expand too fast, and be careful about who runs the school.

The more deliberate and organized the process — and the more buy-in and direction from the community — the better the chance for success.

Research from roughly 15 years of charter schools in the United States shows that running a charter school is not for amateurs. Just a few companies are responsible for most of the effective charter schools nationwide. There are notable exceptions.

In Chicago, for example, two public school teachers began the Noble Street charter schools. According to the school's Web site, more than 75 percent of the students enter school below grade level and more than 85 percent of graduating seniors go on to college.

The Noble Street story line is similar to other effective charter schools. When they work, it's because they are constantly innovative, accountable and results-based.

Fortunately, some state lawmakers are getting on the bus.

Senate Bill 2402 would raise the cap on charter schools in Illinois from 60 to 100. In addition, the bill would change the geographic boundaries that have unfairly limited growth in charters outside Chicago. At present, only 15 charter schools can be approved for the hundreds of districts outside Chicago. Lawmakers should eagerly sign onto these needed changes.

In Rockford, turning out better-educated young people is the key to economic survival.

Companies used to be drawn to the area for its manufacturing resources, but today those same companies have "casters" and can go where the labor force is talented and ready, according to Janyce Fadden, president of the Rockford Area Economic Development Council.

"Our future wealth is in the quality of our work force," Fadden said. Charters can play an important part in quality control — they can help us get ahead, rather than fall behind.