

WASHINGTON

Over a nine-year period, legislators in Washington State heard the call from a broad coalition of parents, teachers, civic and civil rights leaders to bring powerful public school options to the state, to help correct educational deficiencies from Seattle to Spokane. When they ultimately signed the new charter bill into law - the nation's 41st - in March 2004, few dreamed that the nearly decade long effort to reach the final goal would get stymied. But the teachers union - the largest labor union in the country - combined its state and national forces and took the charter school law, by a fluke in state law, to the ballot box, putting it in the hands of voters to keep or repeal the ability to start charter schools. After millions of dollars spent on the petition drive and campaign, and with a public where few could identify a charter school or defend them against misleading attacks, the law was rolled back and the Evergreen State is back as one of the Final Ten that has yet to pass a charter law.

It's not because the state is a stranger to the importance of education. Since 1992, the state has enacted over 20 different education reform programs with a price tag of more than \$1.7 billion - in addition to the \$6 billion already spent on education annually - to reduce class size, improve teacher quality through more training and pay, give extra instruction for struggling students, set goals for improving reading and math skills, and more. Meanwhile, the same teachers union that is currently being challenged before the U.S. Supreme Court over the use of non-members' dues spent on politics is standing again in the way of any charter effort.

It's not as if the state can boast exceptional achievement. Like many states, some students do very well, but on the whole, while slightly higher than national averages, Washington State still has only 35 percent of its fourth graders meeting or exceeding national proficiency standards in reading, and only 42 percent with proficiency in math.

The state lowered standards on state requirements after 326 schools failed to meet federal Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks. That resulted in a quick improving of 35 percent, but did not mask the real story that charters may help address.



The state graduation rate is 68.2 percent, which is a 1.4 percent less than the national average of 69.6 percent. Disaggregated by race, the state clearly needs help with serving minorities. Black students graduate at rate of 47.8 percent compared to a national average of 51.6 percent, Hispanics graduation rate is 52.7 percent compared to the national average of 55.6 percent, Asian graduation rate is 72.9 percent compared to the national average of 77 percent, and the American Indian graduation rate is 40.7 percent compared to the national average of 47.4 percent.

Charter schools cannot solve all a state's problems, anymore than winning the Super Bowl guarantees a win again the next year. But scores of charter schools are showing things can get done well with children who are often least served by conventional public schools. Bronx Prep in New York, where 90 percent of students are minorities could just as well be in Seattle, as could Leadership High in South Los Angeles, where civic leadership and a strong community environment help these students to succeed.

Even though the state fumbled in 2004, it's not too late to recover and take the ball into the end zone to get charter schools up and running.

