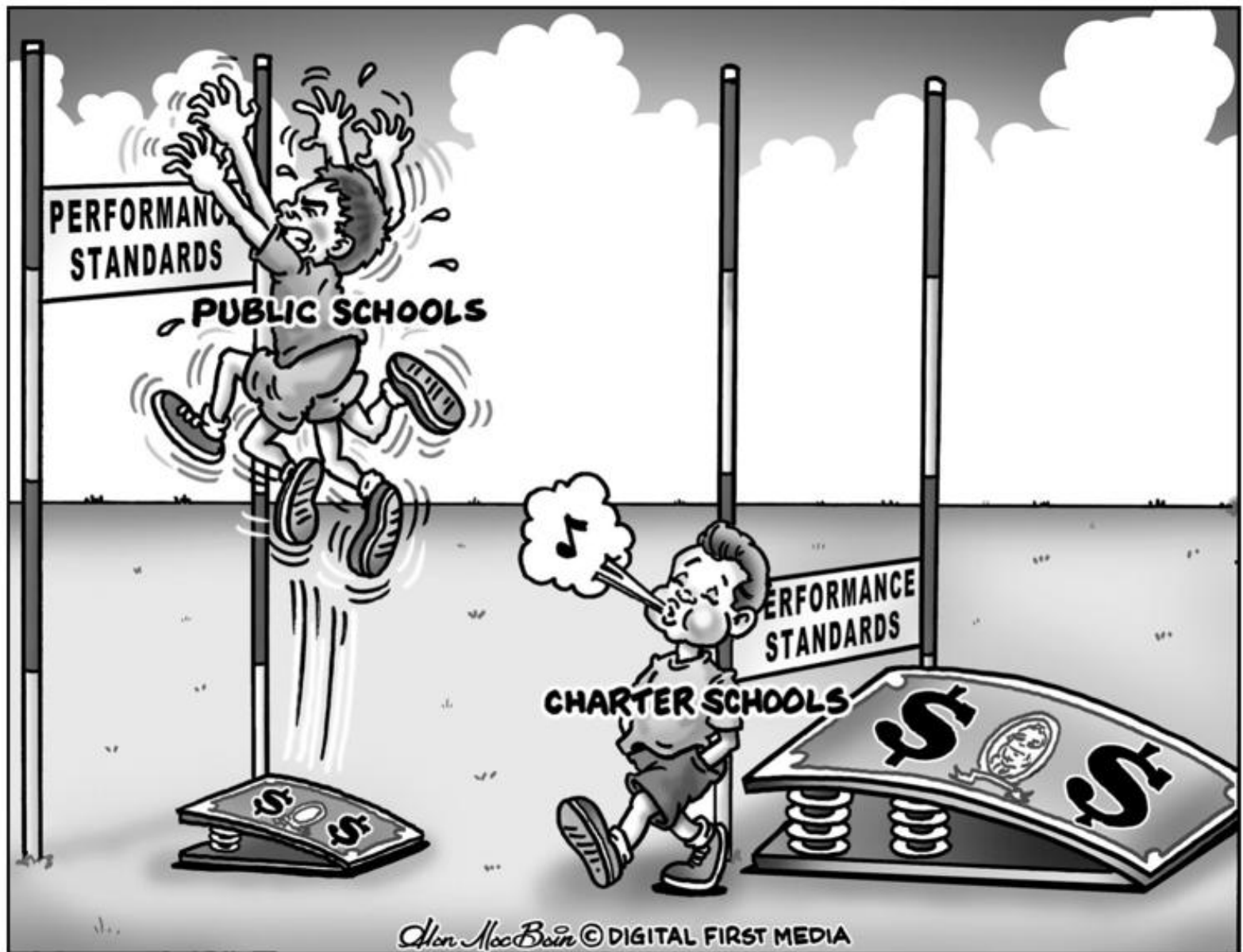


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Editorial: Charter school reform can save taxpayer dollars

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The season of budget debates within public schools has started, and the issues are all too familiar:

- Music and art programs threatened.
- Enrichment and language courses on the chopping block.
- Larger classroom sizes proposed to eliminate teachers' jobs.
- Neighborhood school closings considered.

And, when all else fails in the effort to cut costs, local residents pay more in property taxes in a state that already falls in the top three in the nation for burden on taxpayers, according to a recent report by Pennsylvania Watchdog.

The situation is at its worst in low-income districts like Pottstown, Norristown, William Penn and Upper Darby. Past actions by Pennsylvania legislators have exacerbated the "education by zip code" reality of the property tax, robbing poorer districts of their fair share of state funding. Currently, only a fraction of state funding is distributed under the Fair Funding Formula.

Another significant factor in local schools' funding dilemma is the cost of charter schools, privately owned or nonprofit schools that collect tuition from school districts for each student whose family chooses that alternative.

A recently released study by Education Voters Pennsylvania claims taxpayers could save more than \$252 million a year if charter school reforms were enacted.

Especially troublesome to local school board members is the fact that while public schools are held to performance standards, charter schools are not. Pennsylvania has 15 cyber-charter schools and to date, none of them have reached a School Performance Profile score of 70 or better, which is considered adequate by the state. All Pennsylvania cyber charter schools had graduation rates below 86.6 percent, the state average, according to state figures.

A Pennsylvania School Boards Association resolution currently making the rounds among school boards notes that current state law "exempts charters from many of the state's statutory and regulatory requirements, creating an uneven playing field that has not led to a transparent, accountable or high-performing system of education."

The resolution supports a pair of cyber-charter school reform bills – House Bill 526 and Senate Bill 34 -- now under consideration in Harrisburg that could save \$19.6 million in school taxes each year in Montgomery County alone, according to an analysis by the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit.

The nearly identical bills in the House and Senate would put the burden of tuition onto the parents if their home school district operates a comparable cyber charter school program of its own.

The PSBA resolution points out that most school districts now operate “successful, high-quality, full-time cyber education programs within their traditional programs that provide flexibility and personalized options as a choice for students and families.”

And, those programs are more cost-effective and don’t divert local tax money to the private charter school organizations.

The fact that the House bill is being sponsored by Erie-based Rep. Curt Sonney, R-4th Dist., who was appointed Chairman of the House Education Committee in January, has raised advocates' hopes that this may be the year cyber charter school reform takes hold. Berks County's State Sen. Judy Schwank, D-11th Dist., introduced the companion bill in the state Senate.

But Ana Meyers, director of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools, told the Erie Times-News in a recent report that she's not worried. "I have seen this rhetoric for years," she said. In a March 14 Philadelphia Inquirer article, Meyers called the Education Voters report “a pile of one-sided garbage from an organization that is against parental choice.”

Hundreds of charter school supporters "flooded the capital" last week to promote charter schools and thwart efforts to pass the reform bills.

Charter school proponents claim that the debate is about giving parents a choice if their public schools are failing to adequately educate their children. But the real debate is about accountability and cost to the taxpayer.

The current charter school system in Pennsylvania robs taxpayers to subsidize private enterprises that are not held accountable for performance standards or cost efficiency.

That’s a choice we can’t tolerate. We strongly support action on SB 34 and HB 526 as long overdue reforms.