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POLITICAL NEWS

Missouri panel approves proposal to help charter schools

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By **SUMMER BALLENTINE**, Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, MO. — A Missouri House committee on Monday approved a proposal requiring public schools to sell buildings to charter schools if requested, part of growing legislative efforts to expand charters as a way to fix what some have called the state's "failing" system allowing students to transfer from poor-performing public schools.

Rep. David Wood, a Versailles Republican, successfully pitched an amendment to his student transfer bill that would require public schools to sell certain unused buildings to charters at fair market value. Wood said the deeds to those buildings would go back to public schools if the charters later dissolve. The amendment was approved by a voice vote of the House Emerging Issues in Education Committee.

The proposal highlights tensions between traditional public schools and charter schools, which are championed by some lawmakers as way to address shortfalls in Missouri's student transfer law.

Legislative leaders have said revamping the state's decades-old law allowing students in low-rated districts to transfer to better performing schools is a priority for this session.

Sen. Maria Chappelle-Nadal, a University City Democrat, is one of several lawmakers who said parents need more choices. Students in unaccredited districts now can switch to accredited districts in their area.

"As a state we have been failing our kids," Chappelle-Nadal said while pushing for charters at a Jan. 28

Senate Education Committee hearing.

Lawmaker efforts to change the state student transfer law last year failed when Democratic Gov. Jay Nixon vetoed a bill that would have allowed students to move to private, nonreligious schools.

While Nixon was unwilling to approve legislation that would have used taxpayer money for student tuition at private schools, lawmakers this year have said Nixon's seemed more open to a transfer bill addressing charter schools. Several legislators said beefing up the role of charter schools actually gives families more options compared with private schools.

But to expand charters, Wood said, the state needs to address challenges the schools face in finding affordable buildings.

"There's no doubt that charters here have a hard time getting buildings," Wood said Monday.

Charters are funded by state money but don't receive additional dollars to pay for buildings. And unlike traditional public schools that have bonding authority and can ask taxpayers to borrow money to build schools, charters can either pay for a school with donations or use money meant for students.

Kate Casas, state policy director of the Children's Education Alliance of Missouri, which supports charter school expansion, said traditional public schools also are often unwilling to sell or lease vacant buildings to charters, even derelict spaces that could attract crime.

"They don't want the competition," Casas said. "There is no reason at all that they would hang on to these."

Wood said some public schools might be reluctant to hand over schools because that could mean losing even more students to charters.

But St. Louis Public Schools lobbyist Steve Carroll said a mandate to sell those unused buildings would be "bad public policy" and isn't necessary.

Legislation to force relationships between traditional and charter public schools will only foster "discord," said Steve Green, superintendent of Kansas City Public Schools. Green said Kansas City is holding on to some currently unused buildings in expectation of future enrollment growth.

"It's actually wresting control from one organization and giving it to another," Green said about legislative involvement in school building decisions. That "begins to erode the power of local control."

House committee members must vote on the entire bill before it can move to the full House.

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Wood's charter school bill is HB 550. Transfer bills are SB 1, SB 22, HB 42, SB 49, SB 70.

Online:

Senate: <http://www.senate.mo.gov>

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