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THE WAR ON CHARTERS: The unions' plan to kill good schools



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The state teachers union, New York State United Teachers, is working this week with a key ally, state Sen. Bill Perkins, to smear charter schools as badly as possible.

NYSUT is set to release a harsh report assembling every bit of dirt it can find on charters across the state. On Thursday comes Perkins' public hearing, which will add more tar and feathers. The clear goal is to derail the growing pressure to lift the cap on the overall number of charters in New York.

The state lost out in Round One of the competition for federal Race to the Top dollars in good part because it had failed to raise the cap. The question now is whether the governor and Legislature will raise it in time for the June 1 deadline for Round Two applications.

With President Obama praising and promoting charter schools, NYSUT has changed its rhetoric. It no longer opposes charters outright -- but instead combines insincere rhetorical support for the concept with a bare-knuckles effort to disable them in the name of preventing "abuses."

The union's strategy plainly has four main parts:

* **Starve charters of funds:** Having gotten the Legislature to freeze charter funding last year, NYSUT is now driving for a repeat this year. Even before the freeze, charters generally received markedly less taxpayer money than their local district-school counterparts; NYSUT's looking to make the disparity even worse.

* **Make them homeless:** No school can open, survive or grow without suitable facilities -- yet charters typically get far less government funding for this need than other public schools. This is a particular problem in New York City, where real-estate costs are high and approval processes legendarily slow.

The unions have clearly targeted this vulnerability: They're out to ban Schools Chancellor Joel Klein from letting charters move into available public-school space.

* **Cut them off from their friends:** Outside groups, mainly nonprofits, are key to the rapid growth of charters.

Opening charter schools one by one, each with a separate founding group, is extremely time-consuming. That's why much of the philanthropic support for charters has gone into helping nonprofit groups that can copy successful schools and help them grow.

Nonprofits that fit this bill include Achievement First, Democracy Prep, Harlem Children's Zone, KIPP, Public Prep, Success Academies, Uncommon Schools and Village Academies. These organizations are highly competent and well run, and have attracted the "best and the brightest."

But to remain viable in the long term, these groups must charge fees to the schools they operate: The funds go to sustain the central operations that are key to ensuring school quality and creation.

So NYSUT is focused on limiting these nonprofits' fees and capping the salaries they pay. The motive is not a sudden cost-consciousness, but rather a brazen desire to disable the engine driving

the growth of high-quality (and typically non-union) charter schools.

* Don't let them hire help, either: Some charters need to tap the expertise of private educational-management groups, which can provide vital advice, facilities and fund-raising help. NYSUT is out to ban charters from contracting with such organizations.

We'll get horror stories this week about all this. But SUNY's Charter School Institute, which has earned a national reputation for quality authorizing, already has set up very high standards for any for-profit firm working with a charter in New York state. For that reason, the only private firms with management contracts here are Victory Schools and National Heritage Academies.

Parts of New York's charter-school law certainly need reform. In my view, charters can do a better job

serving students with special needs. And policies for greater fiscal and academic transparency (already implemented by SUNY for the charters it has authorized) should be applied to all charters statewide.

The union's New York City local last week agreed to do away with the notorious "rubber rooms" that paid teachers not to work. Meanwhile, the Washington, DC, teachers union is accepting performance-based pay, another vital reform.

But while these steps are positive, the real issue this week is NYSUT's bid to choke off charters' future in New York.

It's time for NYSUT to stop standing in the way of better public education.

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