



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Charter school enrollment rates are increasing at an astronomical rate because parents are becoming actively involved in their children's academic performance. Parents are demanding results that failing schools are not delivering.

Schools are created to enlighten and educate students and prepare them for a prosperous future; however, there is a power struggle over splitting funding dollars between charter and public institutions. Charter schools are educational institutions that receive public funding, cannot charge tuition and are part of the public school system. A key difference is charters are allowed many structural opportunities that public schools are not, such as flexibility and independence to innovate educational techniques in the classroom.

In 2011, the state created an independent commission, the State Charter School Commission, which is primarily tasked to review charter appeals. Upon review of a charter schools appeal, the commission may override a denial at the local level if it is "in the best interest of the students the charter school is designed to serve" and grant the charter school's application.

The Illinois House has passed a bill that would abolish the commission. The bill sponsor does not believe the commission has a necessary purpose.

The commission, by design, provides a fair hearing to charter applicants after they have been denied at the local school district level. Since the commission's creation, it has received 29 appeals. Only two out of 29 appeals were granted.

Abolishing the commission removes a level of protection and also hurts the overall charter school movement. The commission is a strong advocate for quality education in charter

schools. We should not be taking steps backward in advocating educational opportunities in our most poorly-performing districts.

Under the legislation, the Illinois State Board of Education and a nine-member panel appointed by the governor are now set to be charged with reviewing appeals. This board can no doubt handle the technical review, but the commission is important because it provides oversight, supports and disseminates innovative practices in the classroom and reports regularly on charter school performance.

Charter schools are not a solution for failures in our public system; however, they are a step in the right direction to provide an alternative for families. We should embrace them.

— *State Rep. Joe Sosnowski, R-Belvidere*

Tip Top memories

In 1958 we became engaged on Thanksgiving Day. After dinner, we drove into Chicago to the Tip Top Tap on the top floor of the Allerton Hotel. The featured cocktail was the Moscow Mule served in copper mugs. We were so excited to celebrate there. We hope the bar will be restored when the hotel's new owner completes a renovation. We will be celebrating our 55th wedding anniversary on Aug. 22.

— *Deanna Reffkin, St. John, Ind.*

Fire safety

Last fall, more than 1,000 residents of the 12th Illinois House District contacted me to speak out against the fire sprinkler mandate proposed by the Illinois state fire marshal. This unfunded mandate would have required retrofitting existing high-rises with sprinkler systems — an exorbitant cost directly passed on to homeowners and renters through special assessments.

As a proactive measure to ensure that any potential changes to state fire safety laws are created with more transparency and deliberation from experts, I introduced House Bill 4609 this month. The bill creates the Task Force on Fire Prevention and Fire Safety Education, comprised of 21 members representing firefighters, homeowners' associations, building trades and community members. Everyone would get a seat at the table.

This task force will be a brain trust of experts with decades of experience in fire safety law and best practices that will research and consider the effects of any legislation requiring fire sprinklers in homes, businesses and high-rise buildings. This group will examine all

questions related to increasing rent prices, insurance rates and installation costs, and provide a comprehensive, unbiased report with recommendations to the General Assembly. It will then be the responsibility of the elected General Assembly, not the state fire marshal, to adopt rules requiring the installation of fire sprinklers in any structure.

This measure is about not only protecting lives but protecting livelihoods. Mandates on thousands of property owners won't work, and it's the wrong approach to fire safety. It's time to take a more comprehensive, democratic approach to fire safety legislation in Illinois.

— *State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago*

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