**Charter Schools and the Pennsylvania Governor’s Race**

The May 20 primary election is just four weeks away. And the four candidates vying for the Democratic nomination for governor are attacking Governor Corbett, the likely GOP nominee, on many fronts. The most aggressive attacks have focused on state support for K-12 public education.

Charter schools are particularly controversial: whether they should exist, how they are funded and who is holding them accountable. As part of our ongoing series around the 2014 race for governor, Seventy will fill you in on the basics, let you know what the candidates are saying and help you find credible sources of information if you want to dig deeper.

Best of all, you can hear from the Democratic candidates yourself at an education-issues-only forum we are co-sponsoring in Philadelphia on April 30 from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Register [today](http://wfc2.wiredforchange.com/o/8364/p/salsa/event/common/public/?event_KEY=72039)! We’ll wager that charter schools come up.

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**The Basics**

**Why should I care about charter schools? I don’t have kids who attend them.**

For starters, they’re funded with your tax dollars. While *your* kids may not attend them, a growing percentage of Pennsylvania’s students do: there are currently 162 “brick and mortar” charter schools in Pa., including 86 in Philadelphia with over 60,000 students – roughly 30 percent of the city’s public school enrollment.

**“Brick and mortar”?**

We’re distinguishing charters that are housed in actual buildings from those that exist and provide education online, which are cyber charters. There are 14 cyber charters in Pennsylvania, according to the Department of Education. Students from all different districts can “attend” cyber charters.

**Remind me what a charter school is again…**

Charter schools are public schools. Although they are funded with public money, they are independently operated. Currently, the schools are authorized and held accountable by the district in which they operate. They are given greater autonomy to be innovative in their curriculum and teaching methods and are free from some district rules and regulations. In districts where they exist, students have the option to attend a charter school instead of a traditional public school pending the availability of seats. (For more, read our [Charter Schools 101 Primer](http://www.seventy.org/OurViews_How_Philly_Works_A_Primer_on_the_Nuts_and_Bolts.aspx).)

**Why are charters being talked about in the gubernatorial race?**

Because with many traditional public school systems in financial crisis, the impact of charter schools on district budgets is being examined everywhere. And many question whether charter schools (including the cybers) have sufficient oversight and accountability. The governor plays a critical role in allocating state dollars for public schools. The Secretary of Education, appointed by the governor, oversees the authorization of cyber charters. Bills pending in the Pennsylvania General Assembly envision a greater role for the state in overseeing charter schools.

**I think I’ve heard about charter school reforms. What would they involve?**

One proposal would allow universities to authorize charter schools. Other reforms include mandated annual audits, lower payments to cyber charters, ending enrollment caps, and creating a commission to study charter school funding.

**Are such reforms needed?**

As usual, it depends on who you ask. There is a basic ideological divide between people who favor charters and those who believe they herald the end of traditional neighborhood public schools. Others fall somewhere in in the middle: they can accept that charters aren’t going away, but they want to limit their growth and are concerned about mixed results on academic performance and, in some districts, ethical scandals involving people connected with charters.

**Why does the debate over charter schools seem particularly heated here in Philadelphia?**

What isn’t more heated here? The continued fiscal crisis in the city’s public schools has put everything under an intense microscope. Which brings us back to Pennsylvania’s governor: Since 2001, the state has controlled the public schools. Three of the five members of the schools’ oversight board – the School Reform Commission – are chosen by the governor. So Philly voters are especially anxious to hear what the candidates for governor have to say about public education.

**What the Candidates Say**

**Let’s start with Corbett.**

Corbett firmly backs competition and choice in public education and made reforming charters an important part of his first term. But legislation he supported never made it to a vote in the legislature. Corbett supports creating a state-level entity to authorize and oversee charters (as opposed to only local districts), mandating charter school compliance with state ethics and finance laws, and establishing a committee to study funding.

**What about the Democratic candidates?**  
All four – Rob McCord, Katie McGinty, Allyson Schwartz and Tom Wolf – agree that charter schools need reform. For example, they have strong reservations about cyber charters, expressing concern over lackluster performance and funding that may be above what is needed to provide an online education.

**Can you give some more specifics?**

U.S. Congresswoman Schwartz (who used to serve in the Pa. Senate) supports charter schools in their original purpose as “laboratories of innovation” and wants parents to have choices. Besides calling for increased accountability and transparency in her [education plan](http://allysonschwartz.com/wp-content/uploads/Schwartz-Education-Plan-MC13-copy.pdf), Schwartz states that she would ensure charter schools are open to all students equally and that employees are free to unionize. Schwartz also supports a moratorium on cyber charters.

**What about Rob McCord?**

McCord has been critical of the reform legislation being considered by the General Assembly, saying it favors the charter industry and reduces local control. He supports a commission to study charter school funding and has blasted cyber charters as "one of the big rip-offs the crony capitalists are pushing in the Corbett administration." See his education plan [here](http://www.robmccord.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/White-Paper_InvestingInEducation.pdf). (By the way, if education is the issue you care most about, the PA State Education Association, the state’s largest teachers’ union, supports McCord.)

**And Katie McGinty?**

McGinty believes the state should invest in charter schools that work and suggests reimbursing charter schools based on their actual audited costs. She also argues that charters they must be held to the same performance standards as traditional public schools. Finally, McGinty opposes taxpayer dollars going to for-profit charter school operators. Find more on her education plan [here](http://mcginty.ngpvanhost.com/sites/mcginty/files/Katie%20McGinty%20for%20Governor%20Education%20Plan-2.pdf).

**And Tom Wolf?**

Wolf proposes several charter reforms on his campaign [website](http://wolfforpa.com/sections/page/charter-school-reformhttp:/wolfforpa.com/sections/page/charter-school-reform), including annual audits, higher academic standards and a common application. He would create a funding commission and state office to improve financial and academic oversight. Wolf has also called for a moratorium on new cyber charters, in addition to enrollment caps and more oversight for existing ones.

**Get More Information**

Advocacy group [PennCAN](http://penncan.org/) supports the charter school movement and offers its [issue briefs online](http://penncan.org/research). It encourages, as does [StudentsFirst PA](http://www.studentsfirst.org/state/pennsylvania) and the [Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools](http://pacharters.org/), policies that expand school choice; for example, allowing universities to create charter schools.

On the other side, the [Education Law Center](http://www.elc-pa.org/) believes in limiting authorizing power to local districts and has a [critical analysis](http://www.elc-pa.org/resource/elc-analysis-charter-school-law-revisions-in-sb-1085/) of the legislation being considered in Harrisburg. Also see the [Education Voters PA](http://www.educationvoterspa.org/) analysis [here](http://www.educationvoterspa.org/index.php/site/issues/changing-pas-charter-law-what-is-at-stake-in-sb-1085/).

For more general resources on charter schools, visit the [Pennsylvania Department of Education](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/charter_schools/7356) to learn more about the charter school application process, charter school administration and to view enrollment data.