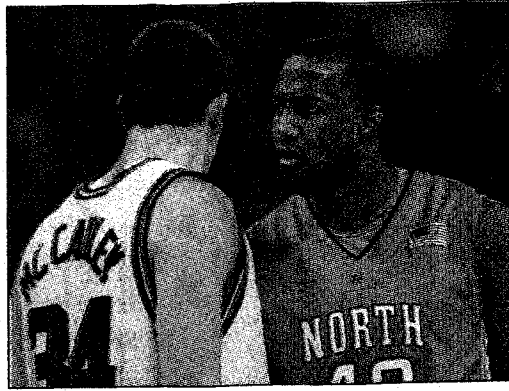


# THE NEWS OBSERVER

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## WOLFPACK TAUNTS, BUT HEELS ROMP

SPORTS

# REASONS TO RAISE THE ROOF ON CHARTER SCHOOLS

BY JANE ELLIS

DURHAM

**S**ince its enactment in 1997, North Carolina's public charter school law has maintained a 100-school cap on the number of charters allowed statewide. In recent years the number of such schools in operation across the state has been bumping up against the 100 mark, preventing the opening of new charter schools.

Recent news reports about plans in the State Board of Education's Office of Charter Schools to close three schools have brought attention to a hot topic in education and politics: Should North Carolina raise its charter-school cap?

While charter schools are not a panacea for the state's educational issues, neither are they a failed experiment. Charter schools serve 32,000 students statewide — about the size of the Durham County school system — and most of those children are happy and succeeding in their charter environments.

And while we must continue to improve charter schools, and ultimately close those that are underperforming, the 100-school cap now serves mainly to inhibit the development of new charter schools. This effectively dampens the educational hopes for students who struggle in traditional public schools, many of whom are from low-income families.

### POINT OF VIEW

Opponents of increasing the cap argue that there would be room for new charters if low-performing schools were closed. Therefore, they say, there's no need to raise the cap. But that argument is a red herring. It assumes that starting a new school should be tied to the closing of an unrelated school, and not based on the merits and potential of the new school.

**A CHARTER SCHOOL OFTEN IS THE ONLY EDUCATION ALTERNATIVE FOR LOW-INCOME CHILDREN** who are not succeeding in traditional schools, perhaps because they are inappropriately tracked into lower-tier classes and victimized by what George W. Bush called the "soft bigotry of lowered expectations." Or perhaps they live in a community plagued with social problems and would be better served in a smaller educational environment. Sticking to a relatively arbitrary 100-school cap dis-



courages the creation of new, high-quality charter schools. That may be why the state's Blue Ribbon Charter School Commission proposed three reasonable ways for the General Assembly to modify the cap:

- 1) Allow six more schools per year above the current cap of 100,
- 2) Ensure that every county has the opportunity to open a charter school (currently 52 counties have no charter school), and
- 3) Let high-performing charters, such as KIPP schools, open schools without counting them against the cap.

Nationally, the charter movement is gaining mainstream political support, with proponents on the left,

right and center. President Barack Obama has stated his support for charter schools, and many education experts agree that charters are a viable, tuition-free public school option for all children, whether they are struggling in traditional public schools or not.

**THIS IS NOT TO DENY THERE ARE PROBLEMS WITH SOME PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS.** This newspaper and the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research have raised valid concerns about student diversity, which we at the Center for Community Self-Help share. Because state law does not provide charters any funding for facilities, Self-Help has had the opportunity to work with many of these schools to finance their facilities projects.

Diversity issues are not unique to charter schools and are equally of concern in many traditional public schools. Since charters must base over-enrollment decisions on an admissions lottery, one way to increase charter diversity is to allow schools to weight those lotteries in favor of under-represented groups.

Addressing low-performing charter schools is, of course, a valid concern to parents, education officials and Self-Help. We do not oppose closing low-performing schools. But it is difficult to say exactly why an individual school is low-performing and to determine how to improve a struggling school before taking the final step of closure.

A simple answer is not always possible. What should be done if a low-performing charter school is located within a public school district where the traditional schools are performing equally poorly or even worse? Is enough being done to help both the charter school and the traditional school better serve their students? Are we effectively evaluating progress toward better performance? And exactly when, how and why does a school — charter or traditional — get closed?

The General Assembly should enact changes to our charter school law — such as allowing for weighted lotteries to increase diversity and strategically increasing the 100-school cap — that provide more opportunity for charter schools to help students succeed.

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