

House defeats charter school amendment; common-sense alternative offered

By Rep. Debbie Buckner

A proposed constitutional amendment that would allow the state government to set up charter schools at the local level and require local school boards to provide funding for those schools failed to receive the required two-thirds vote of approval in the House of Representatives on Wednesday.

[HR 1162](#) fell 10 votes short of the 120 votes needed for the legislation to move on to the Senate for consideration. Sponsors of the resolution have indicated they will seek to have it reconsidered in the House later this session. The legislation was written in response to a recent decision by Supreme Court of Georgia to strike down the use of “special schools” as a method of authorizing state charter schools.

While I support taking steps for the limited purpose of authorizing charter schools, I voted against HR 1162 because of its potential for diverting local tax dollars from existing public schools toward any type of “special school” state bureaucrats decide to favor. Local funding decisions should be made by the elected school board members in those communities rather than being usurped by the state government, which has already cut more than \$1 billion from local school funding in recent years.

A better alternative is [HR 1335](#), which would protect charter schools without expanding the size of government or limiting local control, thus preserving the right of local citizens to have a say in the education of their children and the spending of their tax dollars.

Agency Consolidation: The House voted to approve [HB 642](#), which would abolish the State Properties Commission and the State Personnel Administration and transfer their functions to a newly created Georgia Services Administration, which would also replace the Department of Administrative services. The action is part of Gov. Nathan Deal’s plan to consolidate several state agencies to save money in the budget. Under the bill, the Georgia Aviation Authority, the State Accounting Office, the Office of Treasury and Fiscal Services, the Georgia Building Authority, the Office of State Administrative Hearings and the Georgia Technology Authority would be administratively assigned to the Georgia Services Administration. A related proposal, [HB 805](#), which would revise state law to account for the retirement of employees associated with the State Personnel Administration, was also approved and sent to the Senate for its consideration, along with HB 642.

Budget Public Hearing: House Democrats held a public hearing on Feb. 6 to discuss Gov. Deal’s proposed state budget. Alan Essig, executive director of Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, presented an analysis of the proposed budget. “For the first time in several years, there are no dramatic cuts in the governor’s budget recommendations,” said Essig. “However, even with moderate revenue growth, Georgia faces a structural deficit. In fact, Gov. Deal projects a \$319 million deficit in FY 2014. Without

significant improvement in the economy or tax reform that results in increased revenues, Georgia will continue to struggle to provide services to Georgians most affected by the recession.” Essig also discussed the critical needs Georgia must exert to further economic security for its families and residents. “Where Georgia lags competitively is not taxes, Georgia has among the lowest taxes in the nation, Georgia needs a well-trained and educated workforce, a transportation system that allows goods to get to market and ensures employees a hassle-free commute, and quality hospitals and medical clinics,” he said. “For Georgia to regain its position as an economic leader, additional investments in education, transportation, and quality of life must be a priority.” For more budget analysis, you can visit www.gbpi.org.

Farm Labor: A new program included in the amended budget proposal for the remainder of fiscal year 2012 addresses the problem of labor shortages that were the cause of crop losses for many Georgia farmers last year. [HB 741](#), as passed by the House of Representatives, includes a \$75,000 line item for the Georgia Department of Agriculture to create a program to help farmers obtain workers through the H-2a and H-1b federal employment programs. The H-2a and H-1b federal worker programs provide temporary visas which allow foreign nationals to legally enter the country to perform seasonal agricultural work. Under federal law, the employer must establish its need for the prospective worker’s services. The employer’s need is considered temporary if it is a one-time occurrence, a seasonal need, a peak-load need, or an intermittent need. The employer must also demonstrate that there are not sufficient U.S. workers who are able, willing, qualified, and available to do the temporary work.

“No Child Left Behind” Waiver: Georgia’s request for its public schools to receive an exemption from the academic performance requirements in the federal “No Child Left Behind” law has been granted by the U.S. Department of Education. State School Superintendent John Barge said, “This is wonderful news for Georgia’s students, educators and parents. No longer will we be bound by the narrow definitions of success found in ‘No Child Left Behind.’ We will now be able to hold schools accountable and reward them for the work they do in all subjects and with all students.” Gov. Nathan Deal said, “This waiver will give Georgia the flexibility we need to pursue our goals of student achievement.” Georgia is one of 10 states given a “No Child Left Behind” exemption by the Obama administration, which offered the waiver to free states from the standardized test performance requirements that are part of the education law if the states developed a better accountability plan for their public schools. Georgia’s plan will include an index made up of several different test scores and student attendance rates.

Session Schedule: The General Assembly is in recess until Wednesday, Feb. 15, which is the 19th legislative day of this year’s session. Please continue to contact me with your views on the issues or whenever I can be of service.

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