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Hawaii News

Increase in charter schools' authorizers sought

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Posted August 03, 2016

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The state Board of Education is moving ahead with proposed rules that would allow for groups such as nonprofits and universities to approve and oversee public charter schools — a move that charter advocates say will help foster growth and improvement.

Hawaii currently has a single charter-authorizing agency, the Public Charter School Commission, a state entity that some critics contend has stifled the growth of charter schools. Since its establishment in 2012, the commission has approved three charter schools. The Board of Education and the commission's predecessor, the Charter School Review Panel, approved the majority of the state's 34 charter schools.

Nationally, at least 26 states have multiple types of chartering authorities available to start schools. These authorities include public and private universities, local school boards, city councils and nonprofit organizations, according to the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.

"The quality of authorizers is more important than the quantity," the association wrote in a policy guide. "While it is desirable to maintain more than one authorizing option, having a large number of authorizers creates its own challenges. ... In a small number of cases, low performing charter schools that have been closed by one authorizer have simply gone to another authorizer and been approved."

Hawaii's charter school commission — a nine-member board of volunteers supported by state staff — was created as part of sweeping legislation to reform the charter

school system. The agency has a statutory mission "to authorize high-quality public charter schools throughout the state."

That 2012 [law](#) also called on the BOE to establish, through administrative rules, an annual application and approval process for eligible entities to apply for chartering authority. But that process didn't begin until earlier this year, as leadership of the BOE changed over and complaints from charter schools prompted the board to take a closer look at the commission's performance.

The BOE, which appoints members to the charter school commission, led an informal listening tour at the end of last year that revealed a breakdown in the relationship between some charter schools and the commission and its staff. In January the BOE had its staff begin drafting the rules for multiple authorizers.

The [proposed rules](#) lay out the process for interested parties to apply to become a charter school authorizer with statewide, regional or local jurisdiction. Eligible entities would include college or university governing boards; state or county agencies; and nonprofits, excluding religious organizations.

Hawaii County Mayor Billy Kenoi, the former chancellor of the University of Hawaii at West Oahu and the director of UH Hilo's College of Hawaiian Language have previously expressed interest in having their organizations become charter school authorizers.

The rules also include language to discourage so-called "shopping" between authorizing entities by prohibiting the transfer of charter contracts between authorizers "in an attempt to reduce the level of oversight or accountability to which the charter school is currently subject or to avoid possible revocation or nonrenewal of its charter contract."

Under a timeline adopted Tuesday by the BOE, the earliest an authorizer approved by the board would begin operating is spring 2018. New authorizers could then potentially start vetting applicants that year and approve schools that would open in 2020.

Under that plan, a public hearing on the rules is tentatively scheduled for Sept. 27. Once adopted by the BOE, the rules would be sent to Gov. David Ige for consideration.

The state's charter schools, which educate about 6 percent of public school students, use public funds and offer a free education but are independently run by their own governing boards under charter contracts with the commission. The schools generally enjoy more autonomy than regular public schools in exchange for more accountability.

Jeannine Souki, executive director of the nonprofit Hawaii Public Charter Schools Network, said expanding the number of authorizers would benefit the charter sector, especially on the neighbor islands.

"We feel the charter school sector is maturing. We're not looking at having a large number of multiple authorizers emerge within the state, but at least another two, perhaps, could allow more choice," Souki said.

She said that for the majority of the state's charters on neighbor islands — 21 schools are on Hawaii island, Kauai, Maui and Molokai — new authorizers could potentially craft policies that better address their unique needs.

She added, "We do think that there needs to be standards in place so that we have quality authorizers and quality schools, so I do support that the (BOE) is looking to periodically evaluate authorizers' performance."

John Thatcher, principal and CEO of Connections Public Charter School in Hilo, maintains that having a single statewide authorizer hasn't been healthy for the charter sector.

"Research on the dangers of having a single authorizer says that in states that have had a single authorizer, they've become basically control freaks, they micromanage," said Thatcher, whose school was among some of the first charters approved in 2000.

"A charter school starts because they want to do things differently and they have a certain kind of focus," he said, citing as examples schools that specialize in Hawaiian culture or language, science and technology or the arts. "Then who can best support and who can best create the environment for that school than an authorizer that's aligned to that way of thinking?"

He said that in other states a board or commission like Hawaii's acts as a default state authorizer for the few schools that don't have a focus that aligns with an independent authorizer.

"But if we can encourage charter schools to really have focused visions and missions that are different than what the rest of the state is, then we really need to have authorizers that can be the fertile grounds for those schools to develop under," Thatcher said.

